



*THE END
OF
THE TRACK*
A GHOST STORY

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PART 1

Frank Guerder was a pale man, just under six feet, in his early thirties. Though he was not especially fat he had a soft body, one that was not used to much physical activity. He smiled as the next person in line came up to the table. The man, holding Frank's book in his hand, paused a moment before setting the book on the table for Frank to sign.

"Who do I make this out to?" Frank asked, still smiling.

"Joseph Leahy." He was a tall man in his mid-sixties sporting a white tee shirt and overalls. He watched while Frank autographed the book. "It says in your book that the story is true except the names are changed."

"That's right." He handed his book back to him.

"You know where Green Corners is?"

"That's a town, right?"

"Yeah. It's about seventy miles north of here."

Frank looked impatiently past Joseph at the long line behind him. "Okay. I guess that's where you're from."

"It's just a little town, but we got some problems just like in your book. We thought you might come and give us a visit."

"Eh, well, I'm kind of tied up right now."

"I mean after your book signings over."

"I don't know. My publisher keeps me hopping from one place to the other." That was mostly a lie. There were two other book signings scheduled. One was a week from now, and the other one was two weeks from that one.

"We could really use your help, mister. We don't know where else to turn."

Frank wasn't sure how to end this conversation and the people in line looked to be getting impatient. "How about you have a seat over there," he said pointing to the tables that were set up near the bookshelves, "and we'll talk about it when I finish signing these books." His smile was friendly enough, but he was merely wanting the kook out of his way long enough for him to finish his book signing.

"Sure thing," he said and went to the nearest table and sat down.

Frank was still having a hard time believing that so many people had shown up at this bookstore. Especially considering how flat sales had been for his first two books. In fact, his publisher had almost turned down this third book citing the poor interest of readers for his first two books. Luckily, his agent was a skilled, and stubborn negotiator who had convinced the publisher that this one was going to be a bestseller because it was based on actual events. It wasn't a bestseller yet, but it was rising quickly. As far as the book content went it wasn't completely unadulterated truth. He had occasionally stretched the truth till it almost broke.

When the line of fans finally ended Frank reluctantly went over to the next table where the man sat. He was about to tell him that he just didn't have the time to help him right now. Sorry. Maybe when things slowed down. Then his agent Carla Brimstone came strutting through the doors carrying two large paper cups of Cappuccino. He smiled broadly. She was one of those straight talkers that told it as she saw it. She would send the guy back to where he came from. He hoped that she wouldn't hurt the guy's feelings too badly.

"Thanks for buying my book, Joseph. I hope you like it."

"I've already read it. It's okay."

Carla came over and sat down next to Frank. Carla was a sleek, petite woman with fiery red hair and deep brown eyes.

"Carla, this here is Joseph," Frank announced. "Joseph, this is Carla, my agent." They shook hands.

"You a fan of Frank's?" Carla asked.

"No. I just met him."

"Joseph wants me to do something for him. What is it now, Joseph?"

"Well, several of us in Green Corners have read your book and we think it kinda fits the problem that we're having. The sheriff, especially, is impressed about how you handled this supernatural stuff. He thinks you can help us with our problem."

"I am awful busy, Joseph. I don't see how I can get away. Isn't that right, Carla?"

"What kind of problem are we talking about?" Carla asked.

"Three of our children have disappeared lately and no one can explain what happened to them."

"That sounds like a job for the sheriff," Frank stated.

"Jake, our sheriff, has organized a few search parties as well as questioning everybody he can, but nothing has turned up. He thinks it has something to do with the train. That maybe they got aboard the train."

"What train?" Carla asked.

"The train used to go past the town once a week. That's when we had the station right outside of town. But that's been ten or more years ago. Trains don't run that way no more. In fact, some of the train tracks have been taken up and the old station has been torn down."

"Eh, excuse me," Carla began, "but I don't quite understand what a train that no longer runs has to do with these children disappearing."

"A train runs the track all right. Once a week like it used to. But no one can see it. We only hear that long whistle it makes as it goes by."

Frank spoke up. "But it can't be a train because you said that most of the tracks have been taken up."

"That's right. We think it's supernatural. Some kind of ghost train. That's why we need you. You'll get paid for it, of course."

Frank shook his head. "I wish I could help, but I'm booked up. My agent here would hit the roof if I veered from my schedule." He looked to Carla.

"Where is this town you're from?" Carla asked.

Frank shot her a questioning look.

"Green Corners. It's about seventy miles north of here."

She looked to Frank. "We got a whole week before your next book signing. This might be a good story for your next book."

"Don't we have to, like, prepare for this signing?"

"No. As long as we get there early the same day, we'll be okay."

"I thought we might need to familiarize ourselves with the area."

"No. That won't be necessary."

The man looked to Frank. "So, can you come?"

He sighed. "I guess so." He smiled weakly.

"We need to leave no later than tomorrow morning," Joseph said. "This ghost train has been coming by every Friday night for the last few weeks."

“First thing in the morning sounds good,” Carla answered.

“Yeah, first thing in the morning,” Frank reluctantly agreed.

“Will you be staying in town?” Carla asked.

“Yeah. One of my sons lives here. I’ll be staying with him for the night.”

“Okay,” Carla began. “How ‘bout we follow you. We’re not familiar with this area. What do you say we meet you about eight in the morning at the fast food joint across the street?”

“Yeah, let’s do that. That’ll give me a chance to get my morning coffee.” He smiled revealing gaps where his teeth should have been. “I’m a little grumpy without my coffee.”

“This is great!” Carla announced as they headed to their hotel rooms to extend their stay another night. Their rooms were adjacent to each other. “Think of the publicity this will get us!”

“I don’t know. Can we really afford to stay here another night?”

“Are you kidding? When I tell the publisher that we’re going on a ghost hunt he will be more than happy to foot the bill. The publicity we’ll get from this will be able to pay our hotel bill several times over.”

“Yes, I guess you’re right.”

“Of course, I am.”

“What if it’s nothing? What if these kids just ran away from home?”

“But what if it is something? If there is a ghost train and we have proof of it then the story is sure to go viral. Which means that your face, and your book cover, could be plastered all over the news and the internet. Wow! You might even make the talk show circuit. We could get rich from all of this!”

“I guess.”

“What’s got you so down? This is a fantastic opportunity.”

“I know. I’m just tired.”

“Well, get some rest. I’m going shopping. I need some ghost hunting clothes to wear tomorrow. Oh, and I need to get a camera for you.”

“A camera?”

“Of course. We’ve got to film this stuff.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry it will be subtle. Maybe something that can attach to your shirt pocket, or around your head like one of those headlamps.”

“Great,” he breathed.

“Just think of the money. Now, I need to go before the stores close.” She smiled. “See you in a while.” She headed off toward the mall.

The next morning Frank drove his Monte Carlo the one block into the parking lot of “Roaring Roy’s” a fast food place that specialized in chicken and biscuits and hot wings. Carla sat beside him in the passenger seat.

There were already quite a few vehicles in the parking lot. Apparently “Roaring Roy’s” was a popular spot for the breakfast crowd. Most of the vehicles were late model cars. A few were late model pick-up trucks. The only exception, the one that stood out, was an old blue, beaten and worn, pick-up truck that was twenty plus years old. It sat in one of the spaces atop nearly treadless maypop tires. Meaning they ‘may pop’ at any minute.

Frank parked the car and cut the engine. He didn’t move.

Carla had opened her door but didn't get out. "What's wrong?"

"I've got a little confession."

"Uh oh. That doesn't sound good."

"No. This book of mine ..."

"Yes?"

"I sort of exaggerated some of it."

"I know."

"You do? How?"

"Look, Frank, you're a great guy and all that, but you don't impress me as the type of hero you portray yourself to be in your book."

He was silent a moment. "I could be."

"No, you couldn't."

"Maybe I could." He looked at her. She didn't answer. "So, if you knew I hadn't been completely honest in my book why are we heading out to see this mysterious train?"

"It's great publicity. And I believe that the heart of your story is true."

"I do have a gift," Frank admitted, getting out of the car. "I've had encounters. Just not as dramatic as in my book."

"I'm sure you have," Carla returned as they headed to the restaurant.

Frank and Carla both ordered sausage biscuits and coffee. They found Joseph sitting in one of the booths and sat down across from him.

"Morning," Joseph mumbled, with a mouth full of ham biscuit.

"Good morning," both Frank and Carla answered.

"I happened to think of something," Frank began, "this train whistle you've been hearing might just be from a car. You know they make horns that can make all kinds of sounds."

Carla nudged him and made a face that said he shouldn't have mentioned that.

"I think Sheriff Jake has already checked out them possibilities."

"I'm sure he has," Carla said. She smiled at Frank as if to say, 'the trip's still on.'

A few minutes later they finished breakfast and headed out to the parking lot. Just outside the doors, Frank was suddenly shaken. The old pickup truck was gone. Who in the world would want to steal the old guy's truck?

Joseph headed away from them toward a like-new Dodge Charger. "I'll try to keep my speed down so ya'll can keep up," he said as he opened his car door and slid behind the wheel.

"Not what you expected, huh?" Carla laughed.

Frank shook his head. "No. Not even close."

Green Corners was mostly a farm and dairy town. There were, however, a few small businesses downtown as well as a midsized furniture manufacturing plant on the outskirts of town, and a decent-sized grocery store on the opposite end of town. Downtown, the small single-story police station sat next to the fire station which housed one small fire engine. Joseph pulled up into one of the parking spaces close to the police station. Frank parked beside him.

Joseph introduced them to Sheriff Jake Blisten, a man just over six feet tall with a tight muscular build. He was in his early forties. His hair was short and light brown. A

stubble of hair painted his face. He had shaved early that morning, but his hair grew quickly.

“Happy to meet ya,” Sheriff Jake said as he shook hands. “Come on in here and let’s talk.” He motioned them behind a partition where his desk sat. A well-worn, brown cowboy hat was positioned on the desk. He pushed it to the side. “Before we start,” he said as he sat down, “I need to know what you charge. There’s not a lot of money in the town budget.”

“No charge,” Carla announced. She turned to Frank who looked displeased. “If this works out this could be another book. He’ll make plenty when that happens.”

Frank nodded, though not with enthusiasm.

“I’ll tell you what, if you can solve this problem of ours, I insist you get something. We can afford two hundred dollars. How does that sound?”

“Good,” Frank answered.

“Before we get started,” Carla began, “Do you mind us filming this?”

He looked around. “I don’t know. What are we talking about? Are there going to be a bunch of people with cameras and microphones running around?”

“No. Nothing like that. See that pocket protector Frank’s got on.”

The part of the protector that hung over the shirt had a picture of a penguin with overly large sunglasses on.

The sheriff stared at the pocket protector. “I guess one of these glass lenses is the camera, huh?”

“Yes, the one on the right side.”

“Well, I’ll be. I would have never known.” He shook his head. “I don’t have a problem with it.”

“I was lucky to find the thing. The mall near the book signing just happened to have a little spy kiosk there. I had thought that I would have to buy one of those hand-held cameras. I don’t think Frank would have liked lugging a camera about.”

“No, I wouldn’t have.”

“Anything else?” Jake asked.

“Carla, pen and paper, please,” Frank said.

Carla dug through her purse and found what he needed. She handed it to him.

“I have a few questions for you.”

“Shoot.”

“Has there ever been any train wrecks in this area?”

“Yes, only one that I heard about. You see It happened about twenty years ago and I’ve only been in this town for about fifteen. Anyway, what I heard tell was that the conductor had suffered a heart attack and when he fell over, he hit the throttle, or whatever you call it, causing the train to hit breakneck speed as it went around a curve. It was traveling way too fast and jumped the tracks flipping over on its side.”

Frank held the pen ready to write. “How many people died?”

“A few. I don’t recall how many. Do you think this is the same train? I mean, like a ghost copy of it.”

“Maybe. Did any kids die on that train?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to check with the library in town.”

Frank was silent a moment. “When did these kids disappear?” He had already been told the answer but wanted to be certain.

“Exactly a week ago today.”

“And when did this train whistle start?”

“I’d say about three maybe four weeks ago. At the time folks didn’t think much about it. I think about everyone figured that it was coming from a train passing through Bullock. That’s the next town over.”

“You can hear a train whistle from another town?”

“On occasion. I guess when the wind is blowing just right. But the town’s not that far away.”

“How do you know that the whistle everybody is hearing is not from this train passing through Bullock?”

“The only reason that train stops at Bullock is to pick up and deliver stuff at their big manufacturing plant. That’s always at the first of the week. The train whistle we heard was at the end of the week. Just to be sure, though, I went by the plant and asked them if the train had ever stopped by on a Friday. The superintendent assured me that it hadn’t.”

Frank nodded. “So, three kids are missing, right?”

“Yes, three kids. But I’m afraid that there could be more.”

“Really? Why do you say that?”

“A few days after the kids disappeared several parents came up to me and said that on that same Friday, they caught their kids leaving the house. Not trying to sneak out, simply walking out the front door. When the parents stopped them, they seemed to wake up as if they had been sleepwalking. Now, if it had been the case of only one child doing this, I wouldn’t have thought much of it. I would have assumed that the kid had been pretending to sleepwalk to keep from getting in trouble. But that many kids is a different story.

“But no other parents have come forward to say that their kids are missing?”

“No.”

Frank wrote in his pad.

“Okay. Have there been any reports of adults sleepwalking towards this train?”

“No, I haven’t heard of any. As far as I know it has only been the kids who have been affected.”

“Alright, what are the ages of these missing kids and what are their names?”

“Eh, let’s see. Aaron James. Eh, Brady something.” He opened his desk drawer and looked through the contents a minute before slipping out a notebook. He opened it up. “Here we go. Aaron James. He is seven years old. Brady Glenn. He is nine. Carl Anthony. He is also nine.”

Frank jotted the information down. “Does this train come by at the same time every week?”

“It seems like it. So far it’s been on Friday. I know it’s after eleven, probably closer to twelve, but I can’t say exactly.”

Carla sighed. “If this ‘ghost train’ sticks to its pattern then we have to find out what’s going on tonight. If not, it will be another week before anyone can do anything.”

“That’s what I think, too,” the sheriff answered.

“And I guess nothing has come of your searches?” Frank asked.

“No, nothing.”

Frank swallow hard. He didn’t want to say what he knew he had to say. “I need to be on that train,” he said in almost a whisper.

“How are you going to do that?” Sheriff Jake asked. “So far no one has seen this train.”

"I assume that these three kids have."

The sheriff nodded and looked suspiciously at him. "What's your plan?"

"It appears to me that this train is only calling children, and of a certain age. So, I'm going to need one child to lead me the way to this train."

"And you want me to find a parent to offer their child up as a guinea pig?"

"Well, yes. But not like you think. The child should be safe. I will only need for the child to get close to the train. Someone needs to be there to hold the child back at the right time while I board the train."

"Are you sure you'll be able to board this Train?" Sheriff Jake asked. "From what you've said the train only wants the children."

"No, I'm not certain. But, because of my gift, I suspect I can."

"Like that time in your book where you believed you could defeat that entity with a certain type of crystal."

Frank smiled guiltily knowing that what he had written had been embellished.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Okay, I'll talk to some people. But if you're wrong and this child gets hurt ..."

Frank could feel the blood drain from his face. He knew he couldn't guarantee the child's safety but felt the odds that the child would be hurt in any way other than a slight trauma of being shaken out of a stupor, or perhaps of seeing the ghost train, was extremely low. "As long as one of you can keep the child from getting on the train the child should be fine." He paused a moment. "If those three kids boarded this train as you suspect I see no other way to get them back. If I am even able to get them back."

The sheriff sighed. "I'll talk to some people. Meanwhile, why don't you two have a look around our little town and I'll get back to you in a little while." He turned to Joseph. "You got time to give them a little tour?"

"Yes, Sir. Rollo is tending the shop today. I told him to expect that I would be tied up the entire day."

They sat at one of the outside tables of the quaint little pizza place eating lunch. Joseph had gone back to his shop to check with the supervisor to be sure there were no problems. Joseph happened to be the owner of the furniture manufacturing plant that employed a dozen or so people.

"Are you scared?" Carla asked.

"I'm terrified."

"Really?"

"Yes. The little bit of true stuff that happened in my book was either by luck or because I had no other choice. It was something I was drawn into. It's kind of like this right here."

"Do you want to back out?"

"I want to, but I won't. Now that I'm involved, I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to find these kids." He sighed. "I don't know why I can see things that others can't. Is it a gift or a curse? Maybe some things are better left unseen."

"Maybe. But this special sight of yours, besides saving a few people, is likely to make you richer than you ever dreamed."

"Or dead."

"Yeah, that too." She laughed. "Just kidding. You'll do fine. I doubt you'll be confronting another vicious demon like you did in your book."

He snickered. "Yeah, well that demon was more like a wayward ghost. There was not much evil in it." He was silent a moment. He suspected that she was not very surprised by his admission. "You know this plan of mine is only half-formed. I mean, once I get on that train and it takes me wherever it takes me, then what? Will the kids be there? If so, will they be guarded by some entity? Will I be able to rescue them? If I can, will I be able to find a way back? For all I know I could be stuck there in some strange, otherworldly place along with the kids."

"What if I stay really close to you, maybe pressed up against you, would this ghost train see us as one person and let me board as well?"

"I don't think so. I think if anything it wouldn't let me board either. And, frankly, I don't want to take that chance. If we have to wait another week the kids may not survive."

"Yeah, okay, but you'd better come back. I don't want to have live with the guilt that I pushed you into this."

"I'm not thrilled about having to go this alone. But as much as I hate it this is the way it must be. I'm probably the only one who can save them."

For the next few minutes, they sat in silence while they ate their pizza and sipped at glasses of sweet iced tea.

"I need a backpack," Frank said suddenly. "I need sandwiches and plenty of water. These kids may not have had anything to eat or drink since they left. Oh, and since it's going to be dark when I leave, I'd like a few flashlights as well. One for me and one for each of the boys. You know how the flashlights always seem to go out in the horror movies. I want to be prepared."

She laughed. "Yeah. I'll mention this to Joseph when he returns."

Later that evening they all met at a young couple's house who had one small boy of seven years old. They sat in the living room talking. It was after ten o'clock and the boy had been in bed for nearly an hour.

"Can you guarantee that my boy will be safe?" asked Stephaney. She was a small woman with big golden hair and bright blue eyes. She was in her late twenties.

"I don't foresee any real danger," Frank began. "If your son is drawn to this train, as I suppose, we'll follow close behind him. You and your husband can tag along with the sheriff and deputy. When the train comes into view I will run ahead to see if it will let me on board. If it does, then as soon as I'm on the train one of the others will grab the boy."

"I'm not too worried about my boy Stetsun," Barkley, the father, said. He was a rather stout man who stood just under six feet. "Namely because I don't believe in this ghost stuff. I think this whole idea is a waste of time."

"It just might be a waste of time," Frank admitted. "But I hope not because I would love to find these lost kids."

"Amen to that," Sheriff Jake answered. He held his cowboy hat in his lap. He thought it bad manners to wear it inside. "By the way, I've got something to show you." He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. He began to smooth it out on the table. "This is a picture of Mr. Weldon and a short story about him. I got this copied from the library's archives." He handed it to Frank.

Frank looked at the picture and silently read the article. "This must be from one of the earlier reports of the wreck. It just mentions that it was believed that Mr. Weldon had a heart attack, but they were waiting on the autopsy reports."

“What does he have to do with this ghost train snatching our kids?” Barkley asked with a slight snicker.

“I don’t know. Maybe nothing. But I do believe that this train wreck that happened nearly twenty years ago is somehow tied to these abductions. But I don’t know why it would suddenly manifest itself after all this time.”

“A train wreck?” Stephaney asked.

“Yes. Do you know anything about it?” Frank asked.

“I remember something of it. I was only about eight or nine years old at the time. I remember there were some kids killed.” She shook her head. “That was a terrible day.”

“Three children lost their lives that day,” Sheriff Jake added, “all between the ages of five and ten. They were on a field trip along with more than twenty classmates, a teacher, and an aid. The surviving children, as well as the teacher and the aide suffered some injuries, but nothing life-threatening. That’s in the article.”

“Three children died that day and now three children are missing,” Frank said.

“Does that mean anything?” Carla asked.

“I don’t know, maybe it’s just a coincidence,” Frank answered. “Or, It could be that the train took the three kids to make up for the ones who lost their lives. But if that were true why is it still summoning other kids?”

No one had an answer.

“Do you remember anything of the conductor?” Frank asked the woman. He felt led to ask her this question.

“I remember hearing that he got sick or something. I don’t remember hearing that it was a heart attack.” The woman grew silent for a moment then spoke up quickly. “Wait. I just thought of something. A few weeks ago, while I was at the beauty parlor a lady mentioned that her daughter was soon to marry the conductor’s son.”

“That’s interesting,” Frank mused. “Do you know anything more about the son?”

“No. Just the little bit that I overheard.”

“The conductor’s name is Weldon,” the sheriff said. “According to information I was able to obtain Weldon only had the one son. The mother died when he was about five. Weldon raised the boy himself. The story didn’t mention any relatives.”

“Hmmm.”

“So, what does that mean, ghost hunter,” Barkley said, grinning.

“I don’t know, but it’s something to think about.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Barkley began, “You think that this ghost train is going to cause my boy to start sleepwalking toward this ghost train when it gets here.”

“Yes, I think something like that will happen, and it will be connected to this train. I just can’t say how, or even why.”

“What about the other kids in town, won’t they be sleepwalking too?”

“I’ve asked the other parents to keep a close eye on their kids for this one night,” Sheriff Jake answered.

“I really don’t think my boy will be doing any sleepwalking, but if he should I will be close behind him.”

“We would expect that,” the sheriff answered.

They sat around the kitchen table for the next hour and a half, chatting (mostly about Frank’s ghostly adventure as portrayed in his book) drinking coffee, and eating

cookies that Stephaney had baked earlier in the day. It was just a few minutes to twelve when they heard the wailing sound of the train horn.

Stetsun stepped out of his bedroom and walked into the living room. All the adults turned to watch him from the kitchen. He didn't acknowledge them. He continued through the living room and out the front door.

"Well, I'll be!" Barkley exclaimed. "I can't believe it!"

"Let's go," Sheriff Jake ordered as he stood up. "We don't want to lose him."

"Don't wake him," Frank warned as he slipped on the backpack that he had sat on the kitchen table. Frank figured that it would take a lot to wake the child, but he didn't want to risk it and lose his chance to rescue the lost kids.

A big yellow moon ensconced in an otherwise black sky greeted them as they stepped out the front door. Its light was intermittent however as a line of wayward clouds occasionally brushed across it.

After only a few short minutes Frank spotted the train up ahead. He asked the others if they saw it. They didn't. It was as he had expected. He quickly moved ahead of the boy creating a gap of several yards. He began to tremble slightly. He had no idea what he was walking into.

The train was sitting there ahead of him on tracks that weren't there. He could make out the locomotive and at least three other cars behind it. There might have been more, but if there were, they were hidden by the night. He took a few tentative steps toward the train car that was directly behind the locomotive. From where it had stopped it seemed that this was the car the train wanted its passenger to board. He paused to look back. The boy was almost up to him. He motioned for Sheriff Blake to stop the boy. "Don't wake him," he mouthed a little above a whisper. When he saw that the boy's progress had been stopped, he proceeded to the train.

The train looked almost solid as he came up to it. Though he could see nothing of the interior, the outside appeared to be made up of black iron, steel, painted wood, and glass windows. It was, however, not entirely realistic. There were slight gaps in its structure, transparent spots where he could see the trees on the other side of the train. He paused again before proceeding the two steps that led to the interior of the car. He felt a sudden fear hanging over him like a dead weight. He silently wished that he hadn't written that last novel. Sure, it had brought him some money and instant fame, but it could also be the thing that would lead him to his death.

He couldn't say what would happen to him once he entered the train. This ghost train might sense that he was not a child and send him to some void outside the living world where he could never escape. Or it might simply disappear, and he would fall to the ground.

On the other hand, it might do as he supposed and take him to where the children were. He stepped up into the train car.

Instantly the inside of the train came to life. He was standing in an aisle. A row of seats was on either side of him, each arrayed in black, imitation leather. Up above the seats and against the side was a line of metal racks for storing luggage. On the ceiling down the center of the train car were small round lights that illuminated the interior. He wondered if the others could see him in this light. He looked in their direction but couldn't see beyond the car because of the reflection of the interior lights on the windows.

A long, solitary whistle suddenly exuded from the train. Frank quickly sat down in one of the seats, assuming the train was about to take off. He took off the backpack and

set it on the seat next to him. The train didn't move right away as expected. He thought that it might be waiting for more people to enter. Then he considered that it could have sensed that he was not a kid and was not falling for his trick. He was thinking about giving up when after about ten minutes the interior lights went out. Seconds later the train began to move.

Frank looked out the window at the passing scenery. This did not feel supernatural. It felt real, as if he were inside a solid train, one made of steel and wood and upholstered seats and whatever else goes into the construction of such a vehicle. For a short time, he considered that he had stepped into an actual train. But that was insane. There had been no track, other than a few pieces that had managed to escape being pulled from the ground.

He wasn't sure how long it had been before the train pulled into a station. It felt like it had been a half-hour or so, but he couldn't be sure. His watch had stopped, and his cell phone was no longer picking up a signal.

A single dim light sat high up on the outside wall at the center of an old, wood building. The light bathed the two-door entrance to the building, and a long glass window, in a sickly yellow hue. Other than that, and the interior lights of the cabin car, the night was bathed in a deep black as clouds had taken over the full moon.

The door to the train suddenly opened. For a few seconds he didn't move. He began having second thoughts about his ability to save the kids. Once he left the confines of the car would the train leave? If it did and he was successful in finding the kids would he be able to find the way home? The lights of the car went out. He stood up quickly with the backpack in hand. He realized that the train may take off again taking him to who-knows-where. Perhaps on a never-ending trip along endless tracks through this dark and mysterious world. He hurried to the door and jumped off. At once the train took off and disappeared down the tracks.

He slipped on his backpack as he walked slowly up to the entrance. He looked warily about half expecting that something would suddenly jump out at him from the utter darkness that was just outside of the dull, illumination of the overhead light fixture.

A double door of glass and metal were to the right of the wide window. He knew that none of this could be real, but his eyes told him that it was. He pulled one of the doors open and stepped inside.

The inside of the station looked much like he thought it would. Most of the ceiling was high, scattered with large round fixtures that hung down from it with lengths of chain and electrical cord. The lights were burning, but much like the outside light, the illumination was insipid and unable to wipe all the shadows from the wooden floor. To the right of the entrance the ceiling was substantially lower and supported several lay-in fluorescent fixtures. A set of stairs led up to a second-floor which was about a quarter the size of the main floor.

Ahead of him were cushioned benches situated across the large room. To his left about center ways of the room was the ticket office. Just beyond that was a single wooden door. He deduced that this was the employee's access to the ticket office and perhaps to other offices. Ahead of him, across the big room, dressed somewhat in the shadows were two doors about six feet apart. He could see writing above the doors but couldn't make out what they said. He guessed that they were the women and men's bathrooms.

He suddenly shivered. He felt a darkness hovering about but couldn't tell where it was coming from. *Keep it together*, he told himself. He took a deep breath. He had to do this. It was too late to turn back now. He had to save the kids if he could.

He could feel a tugging coming from the stairway. He turned to face it when a man suddenly came down the steps and rushed past him. At least partially. A part of the man passed through him like a cold breeze. Frank turned about quickly to see where the man was going.

The man went directly to the ticket window. Another man appeared behind the half window in front of him. Frank headed to the window to see what was going on.

The man who had passed through him was rubbing at his chest. "Is there anybody to take my place, Sam?" the man asked. "I got heartburn really bad today. I went to that new Mexican restaurant yesterday and I think I overdid it with the spicy food. I've taken antacids all day long, but they're not doing me much good."

"I don't know. One man is sick with the flu and another is out of town. That's why I'm having to fill in at the ticket window." He paused a moment. "I might could get Howell in here, but that might be awhile. If you could take the next route to Portland, I'll see if he can meet you there and take over."

The other man nodded. "Okay. I guess I can handle that."

The man who had just passed through him turned around. For a moment, he seemed to see Frank, or perhaps sense him, but then he walked through him once again and headed back up the stairs.

Frank watched the man vanish after a few steps. Judging from the picture Sheriff Jake had shown him this man was Weldon the conductor. He began heading to the stairs. Perhaps the children were up there.

The stairs creaked badly with each step and a couple of times seemed about to give way. The stairway could have easily passed for the real thing. He wondered if this ghostly building was on the land of the original station or if he had passed into some other world. If he had passed into some spirit world, he may need the train to get back to his own world. But he had no idea if the train ever went in the opposite direction. If, however, this was not some spirit station, but the old abandoned station – even if it were some recreation of it – then he should be able to find his way back without the aid of this ghost train. Hopefully, along with the kids.

Upstairs he came across two rooms. One room had "janitor" stamped above the door. At the other room, the door was half-open. It was a big room. Fluorescent lights in the ceiling illuminated the room in a soft glow. Through the opening he could see the man Weldon sitting at a table. Three other chairs sat around it. Against the far wall was a soda machine and sitting next to it was a snack machine. The wood floor shined as though it had just been polished. The walls were a pale white.

Frank pushed through the partially open door to get a better look at what was going on. He moved over to the side of the door.

Weldon was looking down at something in his hand and softly sobbing. A cup of coffee was to the side of him. He began to stand up while trying to shove whatever he was holding in his hand into his pocket. At the same time, he accidentally knocked over his coffee cup spilling it over the table and into his lap. He cursed as he pushed away from the table. Whatever he had tried to push into his pocket fell and rolled across the floor. Still cursing the man strode out of the room and headed down the stairs. Quickly, Frank followed him.

The man disappeared halfway down the stairs. Frank stopped for a moment before slowly continuing. That little episode proved to be of little use to him. He thought about what he should do next. The missing kids came to mind. If they were here in this building, they would have to be in the bathrooms or back in the office area. The second floor consisted of only the two rooms. The kids were not in the break room and it did not seem likely they would be in the janitor's closet. The kids were not in the waiting room as well. He paused for a second at the bottom of the steps to see if the Weldon ghost had reappeared somewhere. He didn't see him. He started toward the bathrooms to see if the kids were in there.

The bathrooms, with their busted sinks and broken toilets, were empty of people. All that was inside was the scattering of debris and the mold growing on the walls. That was strange. This could not have been the shape of them when the station was operational. It was as if these rooms were of a later date than the rest of the station he had seen. Most likely when it had been closed for some time.

He stepped out of the bathroom. Several people were in the waiting area. A young woman was sitting on one of the benches with two small children. Two men were waiting in line for tickets. A well-dressed middle-aged man and woman were sitting on another one of the benches. They turned toward him seemingly aware that he was there.

Frank started walking forward not sure he wanted to confront any of these ghosts that were wandering around.

The middle-aged couple stood up and started walking toward him. He froze, hoping that they would simply pass by him heading to the bathroom.

As the couple reached him, they stopped.

"You don't belong here," the man said. He looked at Frank with eyes that had no pupils. "You need to leave." His voice was cold and threatening.

"You will be sorry!" the woman cried in a louder voice.

Frank tried to respond, but the two people quickly passed him and headed to the bathrooms. He turned to watch them still trying to find words to say.

He turned back around. The waiting area was empty.

For a few moments, he seemed to be glued to the floor. The two spirits had shaken him. He was finding it hard to think. He took a deep breath. Pushing himself he began to move again.

He made his way over to the door next to the ticket office. He opened the door and warily stepped through. This was a hallway that opened to two doors on the right and the ticket office on the left. A single incandescent light glowed weakly from the ceiling. He was grateful for this little bit of light. He was glad that he hadn't had to use one of the flashlights yet. It was easier than having to chase a beam of light to see where he was going.

He opened the first door on his right. This room was packed with broken furniture and cardboard boxes full of miscellaneous items. There were no children here.

He had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. There was only one room left to check besides the small area behind the ticket window. If they were behind the ticket window, he should have spotted them from the waiting room. So that left this last room. If the children were not in there, then he would be at a total loss of what to do next.

At the following room, he decided to call out first. He wasn't sure why. Maybe the thought of opening the door and seeing an empty room was more than he could handle right now. "Hey, anybody in here?" he yelled. There was no response. Maybe the kids had

never been here. Perhaps he should have stayed on the train. Maybe the kids had been dropped off at the next stop. Or –he hated to think of it –perhaps the kids were trapped in this supernatural world in a place he could not go.

He opened the door praying that the kids would be inside. He stopped suddenly, jolted by what he saw. The kids were sitting side by side on a long wooden bench. They were staring straight ahead oblivious to his arrival. Except for looking a little pale, they looked okay physically. There was no sign of injury such as scratches or contusions. Frank stared at them a few moments. The children blinked occasionally, which seemed to him to be a good sign. It at least meant that they weren't dead and frozen in place. He set his backpack to the side of the bench thinking that they would need some water and food.

“Hey!” he yelled loudly as he moved in front of them. The kids maintained their posture, not moving except for the blinking of their eyes. They sat like stone statues, impervious to anything around them.

He walked over and knelt in front of them. He watched them a moment before waving his hand in front of their faces. There was no response. He spoke their names as he held their hand, moving from one child to the next. Still nothing. He wondered what else he could do. If he couldn't wake them then how was he supposed to lead them out? He considered trying to pull one of the boys to his feet thinking that might wake him. If he was successful, he would need to work on the other two. Assuming he could get all three of the boys to their feet would he be able to get all three of them to follow him?

He remembered his cell phone. If he could reach someone, they might be able to trace his location. He slipped his phone from his pocket. It indicated that he still had no signal, but he tried calling Carla anyway. It didn't work. The call went nowhere. He pushed the phone back into his pocket.

At once the staccato blast of the train horn broke the eerie silence. He jumped to his feet, startled. All three of the kids stood up in unison, though not from being startled. They still had the blank expressions plastered across their faces. Frank watched as they pushed past him and headed down the hall. He turned and followed them forgetting about his backpack.

The children exited the hallway into the big waiting room moving slowly across the floor as though in a trance – which Frank guessed was not far from the truth. Through the long window at the front of the building, he could make out the train. It was not completely solid. It was shimmering and parts of it would fade in and out of existence as if it depended on some type of signal that kept breaking up. That drew Frank's attention somewhat, but what really got his attention was the sight of Weldon pushing through the front door heading to the train.

Frank followed the children. He felt certain that they were going to board the train. But why? Another thought occurred to him. Would he be able to board this train again or was this something only meant for the children?

A slight rain had begun as the children lined up in single file to board the train. Frank moved right up against the last little boy. It was possible that the train would allow him to get on if it could perceive him and the child as one. Of course, that logic was unproven. Even so, he had no idea how soon the train would take off after loading the last child. It may be immediate, which meant any gap between him and the last child could end in him being left behind. Then what?

The children loaded onto the train with Frank trailing behind them and settled into a seat. Frank sat in a seat behind them close to the aisle.

Something incredible happened just before the train began to move. Weldon suddenly appeared at the front of the train car in the conductor's seat. A line of instruments appeared in front of him. This was not how it should have been. The conductor had his own car. Trains were not set up like busses. Frank wondered if it was because of him. Was this something that he needed to witness?

The train began to move. Frank noted the children. They were as still as before. None had even bothered to look out the window.

He looked out his window. The rain was beginning to fall harder. The passing scenery became just a blur.

He turned his attention to Weldon behind the controls of the train. He kept putting a hand to his chest, rubbing it as if to ease a stubborn pain. He moved his arm as well, curling it up and down. Then, as if he were just remembering something, he began to pat his pockets. Seemingly unsatisfied with that he slid his hand in one pocket then the other. His hand came out empty. At once he looked irritated and worried. He immediately began to clutch his chest with more fervor.

It happened very quickly. Weldon fell forward onto the controls. Instantly the train began to gain speed. Frank remembered that this is what had been hypothesized. Shortly they would go into a curve much too fast and tumble off the track. The actual wreck had killed three kids. On this ghost train, however, no one should be hurt. This should be like watching a movie. At least, he hoped so.

It was nothing like sitting and watching a movie. As the train began quickly accelerating, he could feel the centrifugal force of the sudden movement pushing him back into his seat. It wasn't bad, but it was more involved than he had anticipated. When the train hit the curve a minute later is when his idea of what should happen fell apart. Abruptly he was snatched by this force and thrown the few feet across his seat into the window side of the train car. His shoulder hit hard, and he immediately yelled in pain. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the boys tumbling into each other against the window. He wasn't sure if they yelled out as he did. The deafening screech of metal digging into metal overwhelmed the entire car. The train car tilted, and he was pulled from his seat heading to the ceiling of the car as it fell on its side. The car screeched and hollered as it skidded across the ground. Frank tumbled backward hitting the tops of the seats with his flailing arms and legs. Then the car hit something substantial and he was jerked downward, and his head found the back of one of the seats.

For a moment he lost consciousness. He groaned as he slowly opened his eyes. He was lying between two seats. The train was on its side. He grasped the top of the seat in front of him, which was the side of the seat before it had tilted over. He couldn't see the boys. Apparently, they were hidden somewhere behind the seats. He did see Weldon, at least the back end of him. He was slumped over the front seat. Frank thought about moving to find the boys but couldn't muster the strength to climb over the seat. While he rested, hoping to get some of his strength back his eyes were drawn to a set of keys lying on the floor next to Weldon. There seemed to be nothing unusual about them.

None of this made any sense. If this was an actual train, he should have never been able to see Weldon. Weldon was important, but why? Feeling somewhat stronger he decided he needed to climb over the seats to see what he could find.

Frank was normally not very strong and when he managed to lift a leg over the seat, he lost his grip and fell to the other side.

He awoke feeling as if he had a hangover complete with the throbbing head and the dry mouth. He was on his back looking up at a big round light fixture that hung from one of the large beams that crossed the ceiling. At first, he didn't realize where he was or what had happened. Then, at once, it all came rolling back. He sat up quickly and instantly grabbed his head as the throbbing became a pounding. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. It took a minute before the pounding began to dwindle. He opened his eyes when the pain became tolerable. He looked down at his pants. They were ripped in several places and were spotted with dried blood. He looked about. He was back in the big waiting room. The last thing he remembered was the wreck of the train. He wondered if the boys were back in the small office. If the wreck had hurt him, he thought about what it might have done to them. The boys were probably already weak from their week-long fast, so the wreck might have hurt them a lot more than him. Then again, maybe not. The boys had been here a week and the last he saw of them they didn't have a scratch on them. Maybe they were immune to any injuries because they were invited, and he wasn't.

He pushed to his feet groaning at the pain that shot through his leg like the stab of a sharp knife. He almost fell back down but was able to muster enough strength just to stand there until the pain subsided somewhat. He didn't think there was anything broken in his leg unless it was a hairline fracture. He figured it was just a lot of bruising. He shambled toward the room where he had first found the boys. It made sense to him that the boys would be returned to the same spot. In his last case, the one he embellished somewhat in his novel, there seemed to be a certain logic to what had happened. Perhaps it was true in this case as well.

The door was closed as he reached the room. The door had been left open when the boys had passed through it to get to the train, but it was no surprise to Frank that it was now closed. He had expected everything to be as it started. There was no telling how many of these trips the boys had experienced. He imagined that everything that had happened here was on a loop, repeating itself time after time. But there had to be a reason. But what was it? What was needed to break this loop and set these boys free?

He opened the door. He stopped. His heart sank. This was not what he had expected. The boys were sitting side by side on the bench as before, looking blankly ahead. But now they looked beaten as if they had been in a fight. Their clothes were dirty and torn and splattered with dried blood. Two of the boys displayed a shiner that had partially closed one eye. The one boy free of a black eye had a busted lip and scratches on his face.

"Oh, no," Frank breathed. "This wasn't supposed to happen. He wondered if his being on this train had changed the parameters of this supernatural state. It seemed likely. He could skip the next trip, but didn't think it mattered. He was afraid that he had permanently altered this loop to include injuries, or perhaps worse.

He considered his options. What would happen if he should try to waken the children? Would he cause irreparable damage to their minds? Was it even possible to waken them? Perhaps that had been thrown into a permanent catatonic state. If he *could* waken them without injury what could keep the train from reaching other kids in the future? Parents couldn't keep their eyes on their kids all of the time. Some parents probably wouldn't even try.

He had to break the cycle. But how? What would satisfy this ghost train and make it leave?

In his mind, he began to backtrack to all that had transpired when he had boarded the train behind the boys. His thoughts settled on Weldon. He had to be the key. Maybe it wasn't what the ghost train wanted, but what Weldon, or his spirit, had wanted.

He recalled that when he was upstairs, he saw Weldon drop something on the floor. At the time he didn't think much of it, but that might have been a mistake. Weldon, or his spirit, or whatever one could call this, may have wanted him to see this. He needed to find whatever it was.

He hobbled out of the room and forced his way to the foot of the stairs. He stopped, feeling utterly drained of energy. He bowed his head and breathed heavily. His injured leg was wearing on him as well. He needed a minute or two before starting up the steps.

The woman he had met near the bathrooms suddenly appeared in front of him.

"I warned you that you would be sorry," she snarled.

His frustrations brought him to anger. "Get out of my way!" he yelled.

The woman disappeared.

The blast of the train horn startled him, and he straightened up. He turned in time to see the boys across the floor moving toward the train. They were lumbering as he had been. Because they were wearing jeans, he hadn't realized that their legs had been injured in this ghost wreck as well.

He considered trying to stop the boys from entering the train but didn't think that he could catch up to them before they reached it. Even if he could, then what? Besides, stopping them might make matters worse. He quickly decided that he needed to find whatever Weldon had dropped. He figured that this had to be the answer to stopping this supernatural episode.

He started up the stairs, moaning with each agonizing step. Tears filled his eyes, not merely from the excruciating pain, but from the thought that if the children experienced another wreck on this ghost train they might not survive. Halfway up the set of stairs, he heard the rumble of the train as it began to leave the station. He pushed himself harder as he gasped for air that didn't come quick enough. His vision began to deteriorate. A gray mist washed over him and on the top landing he fell over onto his face. He couldn't move except for the heaving of his chest and the quick motion of his mouth trying to suck the air in. For a few moments, the room spun about him and his thoughts grew foggy. Precious minutes elapsed as his lungs began to fill with air and the spinning room began to lose its momentum. He pushed to his knees. He tried to think of how long they had been on the train before the wreck. It wasn't long, only a few minutes. Did he still have time to reach this mysterious lost object before the train wrecked, or was it already over? The sad part was he didn't even know if finding this object would make a difference. But it had to. It was all he had.

He climbed unsteadily to his feet and lumbered into the room where Weldon had been. The table and chair were there where Weldon had sat before spilling his coffee. The drink machine and snack machine were off to his right against the wall. Frank wished he had paid more attention to the scene when it had unfolded before him earlier. He remembered seeing the falling object roll across the floor but had not seen exactly where it had gone. He dropped to his knees and began to search the floor. It took only a minute before he caught the glitter of light off of something wedged in a crack against the wall. He crawled over to it. It was small. Only a tiny rounded edge was sticking up above the floor. Squeezing his index finger and thumb against the object he pulled it out. It was a

ring. He looked it over to see if there was anything unusual about it. He thought that it could be a woman's wedding ring. He placed it in his pant pocket.

Immediately, the room began to change. The shine of the polished floor and the paint underneath it were swept away in an instant as if from a strong wind, as was the paint on the four walls that surrounded him. Cracks snaked across the bare floor. The floor buckled and groaned. Faded, broken, and stained ceiling tiles began to fall from the metal framed ceiling. He quickly curled up and covered his head. The tiles were made of light fabric so the ones that hit him either broke or simply bounced off him causing no harm. The metal ceiling frame broke suddenly seconds later. Most of it clattered harmlessly to the floor or bounded away from him. But one piece of the framing that had been ripped from the wall had presented a jagged edge. The sharp end raked across his upper arm as it fell tearing his shirt sleeve and cutting his arm.

Several feet in front of him the table collapsed. The legs that had supported it had simply fallen apart and disintegrated into a fine powder. When the table hit flat on the floor it shattered like glass, but the shards it sent out evaporated almost at once. The chairs as well crumbled into nothing. A little further away the two machines seemed to melt away disappearing into the floor. Frank had little time to consider what was happening. This entire incredible event had occurred in less than a minute.

Frank struggled to his feet just as the roof began to collapse. He started out of the room, but he was too late. A big, heavy portion of the roof groaned, cracked, and fell on top of him driving him into darkness.

He awakened with a slight headache and a sore leg, but nothing more. He was on his stomach. He recalled the roof falling on top of him, but if that were so he should have been crushed. He expected to feel some debris on top of him but there was nothing. He pushed up to his knees. He looked around, stunned by his surroundings.

He was outside on the wet ground though it was no longer raining. The light of the full moon illuminated a field full of tall weeds. There was no train station. The only hint that there had ever been one here was a short length of railroad track off to his left.

He knew that the station had not been real, but he had not expected it all to fall away as suddenly as it had. He thought about the ring he had found. Had that been real? He checked his pocket. The ring was still there. He pulled it out. Along with the ring was a slim piece of weed and a smattering of dirt. He thought that very curious as he cleaned off the ring with the tail of his shirt. But as he considered it he thought that the ring may not have been wedged in a crevice of the floor as he had thought but that he had found it in this field where it had fallen when the station had been demolished years earlier.

He thought about the three boys. If they were truly in this station house illusion – or whatever it was – as he was, then they should be somewhere nearby. He didn't see them, but the weeds were a good three feet high in some areas and could easily hide them if they were lying down.

He had another thought. This one was darker. What if the train didn't release them back at this station where it had dropped them off the last time? What if they were destined to ride this train for the rest of their life, never stopping, ever moving in this phantom world? He sighed. He couldn't think like that. He had to think more positive. He pushed these dark thoughts from his mind. He had to believe that they were here hidden here somewhere in the tall grass.

He stuck the ring back into his pocket as he struggled to his feet. The pain in his leg wasn't as great as before, namely because it had become a bit numb and stiff. He could tell by how tight his pant leg was that he had a good amount of swelling.

On his feet, and with the aid of a bright moon to see by, he still couldn't locate the boys. He thought about the room the boys had been in when he first found them. Estimating where he was when the station disappeared and where the room had been in relation to it, he triangulated a direction to head in. A light breeze came and went as he started that way hoping that the clouds wouldn't begin drifting in front of the moon casting him into nearly complete darkness. Having one of his flashlights would be a good help but he couldn't remember where he had left his backpack.

He prayed that he would not have to return to the sheriff and the others without the boys. It would crush them, and it would take a long time for him to live down the fact that he could not save the children. His possible failure along with a chronic fear of what he might find were the reasons he was so reluctant about accepting such a case.

He lumbered across the field full of overgrown weeds that waved back and forth to the tickling of the wind. The light from the moon wavered a couple of times as cotton colored clouds drifted in front of it. Fortunately, the clouds moved along causing little interference.

Minutes elapsed without spotting the boys and he began to get worried. Had he passed the area where the boys had once been confined? It was difficult to tell without any reference points. He stopped. A tremendously tall tree was less than six feet in front of him. Trees didn't grow very fast. Judging by the height of this tree he concluded that it had probably been around when the station was alive and thriving. Which meant it was on the outside of the building. He turned around. He had gone too far. He began moving slowly forward veering slightly to his right so as not to repeat his steps. The wind had momentarily died out and the weeds had stilled their gentle waving. Except in one spot, about a dozen feet away, the weeds were moving slightly, but sporadically. He started pushing himself a little faster in that direction.

He found them lying on the ground next to each other. They were on their stomachs, twitching restlessly as if having a bad dream. Frank squatted down beside the first boy ignoring his own pain. He gently shook the boy. "Hey, it's time to get up." The boy moaned and mumbled something that Frank could not understand. He sat up with his eyes closed. He shook the boy again. "Come on son, wake up. You have to go home." The boy opened his eyes. He was not startled as Frank supposed he would be.

"Who are you?" the boy asked.

"I'm a friend of your parents. I'm here to take you boys home."

The boy looked around. He noted the other two boys on the ground now wiggling more aggressively. "Where are we?"

"We are where the old train station used to be."

"Why?"

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"The train ride, sitting on a bench inside the train station."

The other two boys broke from their stupor and sat up. They looked as composed as the first boy.

The first boy looked confused but not frightened. "I've never been on a train."

"Where are we?" one of the other boys asked rather calmly. "How did we get here?"

“Where’s my mom?” the last boy asked.

Frank wasn’t sure how to answer them without upsetting them. It took him a minute to answer. “You’ve all been sleepwalking,” he answered. That wasn’t too far from the truth. “Your parents sent me to find you and take you home.” They all stared at him but said nothing. Frank pushed to his feet. He pulled out his notepad. He was glad he hadn’t lost it either on the train or in the collapse of the station. He opened it up. “Which of you boys is Aaron James?” The last boy who questioned him raised his hand. He was the smallest and youngest of the three. “Okay, which one of you two is Brady Glenn?” The boy he had awakened spoke up. He was reed-like with shaggy blonde hair. “I am.” Frank looked at the remaining boy. “So that makes you Carl Anthony.” The boy nodded. He was about the same height as Brady but was somewhat pudgy.

He thought about his backpack. He just remembered that he had left it in the room where he had found the boys. He walked around the boys. He knew it shouldn’t be far from them.

“What are you looking for?” Brady asked.

Frank found the backpack and pulled it out of the weeds. “This,” he said, showing it to them. “I’ve got bottled water and some snacks for everyone.”

They looked at him suspiciously.

Frank took a few bottles of water from the backpack and handed them out. The boys took them, but not as eagerly as he had expected. He watched them unscrew the caps and take a few sips. “Aren’t you guys thirsty?”

“A little,” Brady answered. The others agreed.

Frank sat the backpack down in front of them. “Get what you want. I’m going to see if I can get a signal.” He walked a few feet away from them as he pulled out his phone. He could hear the boys whispering to each other. That was good. Maybe none of them would start crying as he had feared. He looked at his phone. Still no signal. Perhaps the ghostly station had nothing to do with him not getting a signal earlier. He tried to call Carla just in case it would somehow go through. Once again, the call failed.

They were all on their feet when he returned to them.

“What are we doing in the woods?” the boy named Carl asked. Except for an extended area of tall weeds where the station once stood, trees surrounded them.

“It’s a little complicated, Carl. Your parents can explain it to you when I get you guys home.” Carl didn’t look too pleased with that answer but didn’t question it.

Frank looked at his watch. It was twelve-fifteen in the morning. He thought it should be a lot later, but he guessed that it seemed that way because of all that he had had to endure. He was amazed that none of the boys had gotten upset over finding themselves deep in the woods in the middle of the night.

Frank looked around to determine which way to go. One thing caught his attention right away. There was a dull reflection of moonlight on the ground several yards away where the front of the railroad station used to be. He quickly realized that it was a portion of the old iron rail that hadn’t been taken away.

He looked back over at the boys. They were eating the snacks that he had brought. He walked over and picked up the backpack. There were still several bottles of water left, but none of the snacks. “You boys feel strong enough to walk?” They all answered yes with little enthusiasm. Looking at them he realized that the boys no longer had the injuries that they had sustained after the train wreck. Maybe their injuries were only an illusion. Perhaps the trauma of the train ride and the collapse of the building had only been

directed at him. After all, he had been the one who had not been called. Perhaps their staid composure was also part of whatever had protected them from being injured. Not to exclude their lack of any real hunger or thirst.

It was evident from their interactions, though slight, that the boys knew each other. Probably from school or from just being neighbors. Frank concluded that that would prove beneficial if this unusual calm were to begin to leave the boys.

Four flashlights had been put in the backpack. He took one and gave one to each boy. They immediately flipped their lights on. "Stay close to me," he said. "I don't think that'll be a problem for you guys. My leg is a little banged up, so I won't be moving too quickly."

"What happened to your leg?" Brady asked.

"It's a long story. I'll tell you later. Right now, I need to get you guys home." He started forward and the others followed.

He was relieved to find that there were indeed some iron rails still running along the ground. He hoped that there would be enough remnants of rail left on the ground to lead them out of these woods

It started out well but after nearly a hundred yards their luck ran out. There were no more rails to go by. Fortunately, the swath of land where the tracks once ran had not been completely engulfed by the encroaching woods. Only a small crop of weeds had managed to break through the gravel and hard ground.

He stopped and checked his phone again for a signal. Nothing. He suspected that the cell towers must be few and far between in this part of the state. He thought it a good time to rest. His leg was stiffening, and he was exhausted.

"Let's take a break, boys," he said. For a few moments, they merely stood there while he located a big tree and sat down against it.

They looked confused, but eventually sat down on the ground close to him.

"I want to go home," Aaron, the youngest boy whined.

"You'll be home soon," Frank answered. It seemed that some of this shell these boys seemed to be in was beginning to crack.

The boys were mostly silent while he rested, except for muted whispers between them. He was concerned about this shell that they seemed to be in, but in a way, he hoped that they wouldn't come out of it completely until they got home. It would make things a lot more difficult if he had to deal with an explosion of emotions such as fits of crying, and whining, and an onslaught of questions that he couldn't answer.

After a few minutes of rest, he decided to press on. His leg was beginning to feel board-stiff but sitting around any longer wasn't likely to help. He climbed to his feet. "Alright boys. Let's go." He started walking nearly dragging his injured leg. The boys obediently rose to their feet and followed him.

He walked another fifteen minutes along a dwindling trail of old gravel once used to border the iron train rails. Weeds had already broken through the rocks in wide swaths nearly obscuring much of the old train route. He wondered how long they would be stuck in these woods if he should lose all trace of where the old tracks had been. He checked his phone. Still no signal.

Another fifteen minutes passed. He was exhausted and frustrated and wondered how long he could go on. He was about to call for another break when he suddenly caught sight of the full set of rails. The rails were a bit rusty but were otherwise in good shape as was the wood slats between them. He brightened for a minute realizing that it would now

be easier for them to find their way out. After another minute he became more curious when he noted that no weeds were growing down the middle of the railroad track. He thought of something and quickly turned around. He shined his flashlight back the way they had come. He could hardly believe what he saw. He swallowed hard. As far as he could see the railroad track was together and in good shape. It was not how it was only a couple of minutes ago. There should have been only a few yards of completed track behind them, the rest of the way as far as he could see should have been a rudimentary trail with weeds growing up where the tracks had once been. But that was not the case.

He wasn't sure what to make of this. Why had these tracks suddenly appeared? A thought occurred to him. What if this ghost train was coming back? He couldn't think of a reason why it would, but there seemed to be no other explanation.

"Stay away from the tracks," he yelled to the boys. The boys, who were already a couple of feet away from the tracks moved further back. He took his own advice and moved away as well.

He wasn't sure what would happen if they were hit by this train. Maybe it would just pass harmlessly through them. Judging from the injuries he received, however, it seemed that real injuries, even possibly death, could occur.

He called for a break and they all sat on the ground a few yards from the track. He rubbed his leg hoping to push some of the stiffness out of it while he listened for a train whistle or the rumbling of a train down the tracks. The night was silent except for the sound of distant bullfrogs.

Reluctantly, after a few minutes rest, he pushed to his feet once more and motioned the boys to follow. After another few minutes of following the railroad tracks a train whistle blew in the distant, and not too far ahead of them he spotted a paved road. The road crossed the set of railroad tracks.

"Did you boys here that train whistle?"

"I didn't hear no whistle," Carl answered. The other two boys answered no."

"Okay." He didn't expect that they would have since he believed that the whistle was from the ghost train. But that didn't matter. What mattered was that they were about to be clear of the woods. He smiled. The road was a glorious sight to see. He almost laughed and cried at the same time. It was beginning to seem like they would be stuck in these woods forever. Given the supernatural experience they had undergone it wasn't out of the realm of possibility. The boys behind him noticed the road as well but showed little reaction to it.

As they grew nearer the highway, he spotted a set of headlights coming from their right, on the other side of the railroad tracks, heading along the road toward them. At the same time, he spotted a train barreling down the tracks about to cross the road. It was the same dilapidated track that they had been following. The two seemed to be on a collision course. He held his breath, not realizing it, as the train came up to the road. Before today he would have expected the car to pass straight through the train. But considering the real injuries he received from being on this train, he couldn't be certain. The train suddenly roared across the road. He heard no crash of metal and steel. He was instantly relieved and increased his pace, as much as his leg would allow, to the road. Though he could not see the car, he felt it obvious that it had stopped just before the track. And, if he got to the road quickly enough, he could flag it down.

With his ever-stiffening leg, he was slow. Fortunately, for whatever reason, the train was pulling a lot more cars than he remembered. They were able to make the trek to the road before the train had completely passed through the intersection.

The car was crossing the train tracks just as he hobbled into the road. He briefly wondered how this person could see this train. Did this person possess the same talent as his? He raised his hands to get the driver's attention. He hoped that his disheveled look wouldn't scare the motorist off. The brake lights of the car lit up and the car stopped a few feet in front of him. The driver's window rolled down.

A woman in her early fifties stuck her head out the window. She watched the three boys coming up beside Frank before speaking. "Can I help you," she called out the window.

Frank took his phone out of his pocket and checked for a signal. He still didn't have one. He was beginning to think that he had damaged the phone during the train wreck. "I can't get a signal on my phone. If you have a signal do you mind calling someone for me?" He thought better of asking the woman for a ride, or even daring to walk up to her car. A woman alone, and at night, would likely be wary of a stranger approaching her, and he didn't want to scare her off.

"I can do that," she said. "What's the number?"

He rattled off the number. "Eh, that's the Sheriff's cell number."

"Okay." She paused a moment to look at him and the boys. "What would you like me to say?"

"Tell him you're with Frank and that he has the three boys. He'll know what you're talking about."

Frank moved back a few feet toward the front of the car to give the woman a little privacy. In the light of the moon, he could see the woman through her windshield lift her phone to her ear. He was too far away from her to hear what she was saying. He thought that she would call him over to talk to the sheriff any minute, but it appeared she had plenty to say over the phone.

It seemed an inordinate amount of time before she finally put her phone down and drove up to him.

"Hop in," she said. "I'll take you and the boys over to the sheriff."

Frank waved to the boys ushering them into the back seat. They climbed in wordlessly as if half asleep. He slipped into the passenger seat.

"I'm Teresa Lang," the woman said extending her hand.

"Frank Guerder," he answered, and shook her hand. "Thank you so much for this."

"Are they alright?"

Frank looked back. "They appear okay physically, but they've had a rather traumatic experience. I guess they're in somewhat of a shock."

"Jake told me about you," she said as she put the car in drive and began to pull away. "Jake and I were good friends in high school. Of course that was many, many years ago."

"So, you know about the ghost stuff?"

"Yes, he just told me. I knew about the disappearances, but I didn't know what he was doing about it. I thought that the boys had simply run away or had been kidnapped. I certainly didn't expect this to be supernatural."

"Speaking of that, I was wondering if you saw the train pass by a few minutes ago?"

She looked confused. "Yeah. I didn't think trains came by here anymore. Why did you ask? Was there something about it that I should have noticed?"

"Not exactly. You were right, though. The trains no longer go by here. In fact, much of the tracks have already been removed."

"What are you saying? Are you saying that train is going to run out of tracks, that it's going to wreck?"

"No." He paused. "I'm saying the train that you saw does not exist."

"What do you mean it does not exist?" She turned briefly to look at him then turned her attention back to the road. "Jake mentioned a 'ghost train' when I talked to him on the phone. Are you saying the train that I stopped for wasn't real?"

He shook his head. "I'm not sure what *real* is, but it's not real as we know it. For all intents and purposes, it's a ghost train."

"Wow! That's incredible. I've never seen a ghost before. Not one of a human or a machine."

"That would have been my next question. Some people, like myself, have multiple encounters. But you haven't had a single encounter?"

"No, I don't recall any."

"That's a good thing. This ghost stuff isn't as glamorous as it seems. Though it has given me plenty of fodder for my books."

"I just thought of something. Jake said that this ghost train had something to do with the train wreck years ago."

"That's right. More to the point it involved the death of the conductor, a man named Weldon."

She laughed. "You've got to be kidding me."

He smiled in reaction to her laugh. "No. Why do you say that?"

"Weldon's son, Hanson, is engaged to my daughter. They are due to be married in three weeks." She turned the car into Sheriff Jake's driveway.

"What?! You don't say! This is all beginning to make sense now. I found a ring that Weldon had dropped just before he took his last train ride."

Teresa stopped the car and put it into park. "You think the ring has to do with the wedding? Maybe it was Weldon's wife's ring? Perhaps he wanted his son to have it?"

"Yes, yes, of course, that's it."

The sheriff came out of his house followed by his wife and the parents of the three boys.

Frank and Teresa slipped out of the car about the same time. The boys came out of the car seconds later. At first, they looked confused, lost, but it quickly passed, and they began to smile, then suddenly they ran to their parents who were waiting along with Jake and Carla on the front porch.

"The boys were in quite a stupor a few minutes ago," Frank said to Teresa.

"They don't seem like it now," she returned. "I guess the shock of what they experienced is wearing away."

"Probably so. The good news is they may not remember much of what happened."

Jake held out his hand as Frank walked up to the steps of the front porch. Jake vigorously shook his hand. "I don't have the words to thank you enough," Jake said.

"I'm glad I could help, and I'm really happy that it's all over."

"Rough day, huh?"

"You could say that."

Carla strode down the steps pushing in front of Jake to hug Frank. Teresa stepped up to Jake smiling broadly.

“How have you been, Teresa?” Jake asked. “It’s been a long time.”

“Fine,” she answered, and they hugged.

“What are you doing out so late?” Jake asked.

“I work at Morgan County hospital, second shift. Usually I’m out by twelve but there were a couple of bad wrecks this evening and they asked me to help out in the emergency room.”

Jake nodded. “Let’s all go inside, I told the doctor I’d call him if, I mean when, Frank got the boys back, so he could look at them and make sure they were okay.”

It was a short time later when the doctor arrived and examined the boys. It was a basic exam. They all seemed relatively healthy. The boys had returned to their old selves, running around and acting up as if nothing had happened. The doctor’s only concern was, as Frank expressed, was that the boys couldn’t remember what had happened and had only a faint recollection of being led away from the train depot by Frank. For now, he asked that the boys be fed and given plenty of water and to keep careful watch over them in case something should come up. He requested that the boys be brought to the clinic the next day for a more extensive exam.

The doctor examined Frank as well. The doctor found that he had numerous scrapes and bruises as well as a slight concussion and a sprained leg. He advised him to go in for a more thorough exam as soon as possible.

After the doctor had left, as well as the boys and their parents, Sheriff Jake, Frank, Carla, and Teresa sat down at the kitchen table while Angela started up the coffee maker. They figured they weren’t going to get much sleep tonight anyway. Except for Teresa who opted out for a soda.

“Give me some details,” Jake began, “what happened, and how were you able to get those kids free? I know you said you were going to tell everyone tomorrow, but I want to know now.”

“It’s a long story.”

“We’ve got coffee coming. Go ahead.”

It took some time, but he recounted the story trying not to leave out any of the interesting details. At the end of the tale, he pulled out the ring and placed it on the table. Angela went to fix a second pot of coffee for Frank and Carla. The others decided that one cup was enough.

Each of them, but Angela, took a turn looking at the ring as they passed it around the table. Teresa took a bit longer before finally placing it back on the table.

Jake looked to Teresa and Frank. “So, the two of you think that Weldon, or his ghost, had wanted his son to have this ring to give to his fiancé?”

“That makes sense to me,” Frank said.

Angela filled the coffee cups and returned the carafe to the kitchen. She took her seat and while the others fixed up their coffee, she picked up the ring. She moved it around in her hand letting the light hit it. “I used to work at a jewelry store up until a few months ago and I’m no expert by any means but to me this looks like a very expensive ring. I would say that it’s a couple of carats and the cut of the diamond is very good.”

“I imagine your daughter will be thrilled,” Jake said.

“I’m sure she will be,” Teresa said. She smiled thinly.

“I’ll bet that Weldon’s son will be happy to get his mother’s ring,” Angela said. “He probably doesn’t have much memory of her.”

“That’s great,” Jake said, “but the really important thing is that the boys are home safe, and this ghost train is out of our life.”

“Here, here,” Carla said. “And it’s all due to our man Frank.”

“Cheers,” Jake said raising his coffee cup. The rest of them raised their cups. “To Frank!”

“To Frank!” everyone repeated.

Frank lifted his cup and managed a slight smile. Then the smile faltered. At once he felt that something was wrong.

PART 2

"Why are you so quiet?" Carla asked. She was driving them back to the hotel where they had stayed for the book signing. "I know you're tired but I still thought you'd be talking up a storm. You've just saved three little boys and made some money doing it. Not to mention how your books are going to skyrocket after word gets out about your latest adventure."

"I know I should be thrilled, but something doesn't feel right."

"What doesn't feel right?"

"Just before I met this Teresa, she was stopped at some railroad tracks waiting on a train to pass."

"I thought the trains didn't go through this town anymore."

"They don't. That's just it. The train she had stopped for was the ghost train."

She was silent a moment. "I guess you think this ghost train should have disappeared once you found the ring?"

"Well, yes."

"Maybe this spook train hadn't left because at that time you hadn't solved the puzzle? You had only found the ring but didn't know how it fit into the puzzle."

He thought a moment. "Yes, that's possible."

"But?"

"One thing I hadn't told you. I didn't think it important after everything seemed to work out. But now I'm not so sure"

"Okay. I'm almost afraid to ask. What is this *thing* that you hadn't told me?"

"Remember the story I told you about being on this ghost train when it flipped off the track?"

"Yes, you said it felt as if you were actually there when the train wreck happened."

"Yes. Well, what I didn't mention was that when the train had settled on its side and had come to a stop, I spotted Weldon slumped over one of the seats. I noticed that a set of keys were on the floor beside him. I don't know what significance this might hold, if any, but it does seem curious that my eyes would be drawn to those keys."

"Maybe they were just keys. Nothing cryptic about them."

"That's what I tried to believe, but my mind keeps coming back to them. I'm beginning to believe that these keys are just as important as the ring."

Carla sighed. "Well, it looks like you've succeeded in bursting my big bubble of joy."

"Sorry."

"I hate to ask." She sighed. "What do we do about it?"

"As much as I'd like to let this go I can't. This train will probably be back to pick up more kids. We have to go back and talk to the sheriff."

She was silent for several moments mulling the statement over in her mind. "It's late, or really early, and we're almost back to the hotel. Why don't you give the sheriff a call sometime tomorrow and explain what you came up with?"

"Yes. I think I should sleep on it and if I hadn't changed my mind, I'll give him a call."

"We should check your camera as well. Maybe there's a shot of those keys on the video."

"Yeah, we'll do that."

She noted his head leaning forward as if he were about to nod off. "You look beat."
"I am. As soon as we check out the video, I'm hitting the showers and then the bed."

After stopping for some biscuits and orange juice to go they settled in Carla's hotel room to watch the video. Frank relaxed in a heavily cushioned armchair while Carla set the video to show on the hotel's television set.

"Where's the train?" Carla asked minutes after the video had started.

"No one could see the train but me, so it makes sense that the train wouldn't show up on film."

"Oh, no," she groaned.

Frank leaned back deeply in the chair and closed his eyes. He knew what to expect.

After going through the entire video, fast-forwarding in several spots, Carla turned it off. "Nothing. Nothing but you and the boys, woods, and a couple of shots of the landscape moving by very quickly. Apparently, the fleeting landscape was when you were aboard the train though there are no shots of the train. There are no shots of anything paranormal. Nothing!"

"Sorry."

She turned to Frank. "Do they make a special camera to pick up paranormal activity?"

"I don't know. I kind of doubt it."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

He groaned and pushed himself to his feet. "I'm going to my room. I'm worn out. I'll see you in the morning, or afternoon, whatever."

"Go to bed. You don't look like you can think straight. Sleep as late as you want I'll call Sheriff Jake and let him know what's up."

"Oh, thanks. You're a doll."

She grinned. "I know."

CHAPTER 2

“Do you think I should give the money back?” Frank asked from the passenger side of Carla’s Lexus. He had asked her to drive. He was still tired and hurting from yesterday, and if today was just as bad, he wouldn’t want to drive back.

“You should, at least, offer it. I don’t think he’ll want it back. You did rescue the boys.”

“Yes, I did. That was the whole agreement.”

“That’s true, but you didn’t stop the threat of it happening again.”

“I may not be able to.”

“Sure, you will.”

He smiled. “Thanks for the confidence, but I’m not feeling it. Just before falling asleep last night I had the sense that there was something much darker ahead.”

“Was this a human sense, or your paranormal sense?”

“I’m not sure. It could be just my anxiety at having to go back there. Sometimes it’s difficult to separate the two.”

“I’ll take your word for it. I just have normal senses.” She grinned.

“Haha.”

“If I had these paranormal senses like yours, I’d get me a couple of people together and have, like, a ghost buster’s group. We’d get our own television show and make gobs of money.”

“That’s not me. I’d much rather be home writing about something like this instead of actually doing it.”

“I can’t believe we’re the same age. Where is your sense of adventure?”

“My adventure is in my books. It’s also safer and less tiring.”

“I guess when I get as old as you are mentally, I’ll be ready for the quiet life as well.” She burst into laughter.

“I want another agent.”

“Too late, buddy. You’re stuck with me.”

It was about two in the afternoon when they arrived at the sheriff’s office in Green Corners. Jake was pushed back in his chair wearing his brown cowboy hat and eating a large hamburger sandwich when they walked in.

“Have a seat. I don’t usually eat my lunch this late, but I was busy this morning rounding up some things for you.” He took a big sip of his tea.

“Oh,” Frank said, “what kind of things?”

He set the tea down on his desk. “I got us a four-wheeler. You might have noticed it on the back of my pick-up truck.”

“Yeah,” Carla answered. “It was hard to miss.”

He finished his hamburger and threw the trash in the can sitting near his desk.

“Okay. Anyway, I contacted my buddy Rick at ‘Rick’s sportbikes’ last night and convinced him to open early and loan me the bike. He owed me a favor.”

“Good,” Frank said. “I was afraid we’d have to do some more walking.”

“We may still have to do some walking if the brush gets too thick. How’s your leg, Frank?”

“It’s still a bit swollen but I can manage.”

“Good. Oh, I also threw a shovel in the back of the four-wheeler. “After all this time those keys are most likely buried under the dirt. Which is why I dug out my metal detector from my shed.”

“Good,” Carla said. “You told me on the phone you thought you still had it.”

“Yeah, but I hadn’t used it in a few years, so I wasn’t certain if I had loaned it out or given it away. When I first bought the thing years ago, I thought I could make myself a good income by finding old coins and jewelry.” He grinned. “That didn’t happen, so I finally retired it.”

“Are we ready to do this?” Frank asked.

“Yes, but before we leave are you sure those keys are still out there. It looks to me like the clean-up crew would have found them?”

“I *feel* that they are out there. That was the reason I was drawn to the keys while on the train.”

“Are you sure that this is necessary? I mean, finding the ring, and then discovering that Weldon’s son is about to get married seems too coincidental to me. It all seems to be so neatly wrapped, like the ending of one of your stories.”

“I know. I wish I could leave it like that but ... I feel that this is not finished. And if it’s not finished the train might not go away.”

“Okay then. Let’s head on out.”

Sheriff Jake pulled the truck off the road on a wide swath of flat ground adjacent to an old railroad crossing. The rails were still lying on the ground like old discarded bones.

Jake walked over to the tracks and looked in the direction they needed to go.

“Looks like we got us a clear shot if we ride close to the rails. At least, as far as I can make out. Hop on.”

Frank motioned Carla upfront and he slipped into the back seat of the four-wheeler.

Jake maneuvered the bike around the pick-up truck to the line of tracks. “You might want to hold on, this is going to be a bumpy ride.”

It was about ten minutes later when Jake reached the spot where he believed the train wreck had occurred. He pulled out some sheets of paper from his pocket and unfolded them. One was a picture of a photo taken right after the wreck. He had copied it from an old newspaper. The other was an aerial view of where the wreck had happened. He stepped out of the four-wheeler. Frank and Carla exited after him. “This looks to be the approximate place where the conductor cab would have ended up.”

“I’ll walk ahead and start searching through the weeds and brush,” Carla said. “I guess that leaves you with the shovel,” she said grinning.

Frank grinned back at her. “Thanks,” he said picking up the shovel.”

Jake began to slowly move the detector over the rocky ground on the right side of the rails to a length of about six feet. Most of the small rocks that had once been laid on each side of the rails were gone either because they had sunk into the ground or others decided they could use the gravel elsewhere. Not hearing the familiar ‘beep’ when the detector detected something, he steadily inched forward.

“This could take a while,” Jake remarked. “Can’t you sense about where these keys might be?”

“No. At least not right now. I can’t control these senses. They come and go, and I don’t know why.”

"You know, that supernatural stuff you have probably makes you a lot of money, though it's not something that I would like."

"I didn't ask for these special senses. They're not as fun as people think. But I guess I have a responsibility to make the best of them."

"Sure, I can understand that."

After going about twenty feet Jake stopped. "You know, if Weldon had dropped the keys in the train, I think someone would have picked them up and given them to his family along with his other personal effects."

Frank sighed deeply. "That makes sense but ..." Frank placed a hand over his eyes as if a headache was coming on. "I don't know." He looked utterly confused.

"Well, we're here now," Jake started, "it won't hurt to look around a little longer."

Frank gazed down the line of tracks. His countenance suddenly improved. "No. I feel they are still here."

Jake nodded. "Good."

"When I saw Weldon in the train car with the keys, they were not on him. They were on the floor. The first responders may not have seen the keys. Later when the cars were being hauled off the keys could have fallen out of the car. It had been raining that day. There must have been mud on the sides of the tracks."

"I didn't realize that it had been raining that day."

"I hadn't thought of it until now."

"So, if there were a lot of mud the keys may have been pushed into the ground."

"Yes." Frank thought a moment. "Would they have hauled the wreckage out the same way we came in?"

"I would think so."

"Uh, huh. I think we should be searching the other way then."

"You got it."

"Carla," Frank called. Carla was about a dozen yards ahead of them. "Change of plans. We're heading back the other way."

Carla headed back toward them. "I'm beginning to think you're just guessing at this."

Frank laughed. "You've discovered my secret."

She patted him on the back as she passed. "You give psychics a bad name. But you sell a lot of books. That's why I hang out with you."

It was a few minutes later when Jake yelled to the others. He was a few yards ahead of them and a couple yards off to the side of one of the rails. "I think I've got something."

Frank and Carla hurried to him.

"I hope it's not another can," Carla groaned.

Frank began to dig where Jake pointed. On the second scoop, he picked up something that glittered in the sun.

"It's the keys," Carla said excitedly as she reached into the dirt and pulled them out."

"I can't believe this," Jake uttered. "Can I see the keys?" Carla handed them to him. He brushed the dirt off the set of four keys. Three of the keys looked like house keys. The other key was different. "This one is a safe key."

"How do you know that?" Frank asked.

“Rucker is engraved on one side of the key. Rucker used to make safes, but they went out of business about four or five years ago.”

“So, where does this leave us?” Carla asked.

“Not sure,” Jake answered.

“Perhaps there’s a safe in Weldon’s old house,” Frank said.

“I’ll have to check into that,” Jake said. “If I remember the story correctly Weldon’s son was put in a foster home after his dad’s death. And, as I understand it the house was a rental, which means that the place could have changed hands many times since Weldon’s passing.”

“If that’s true,” Carla began, “anything that was in that safe is probably long gone by now.”

Jake nodded. “True.” He turned to Frank. “If you held these keys in your hand could you get a reading or something?”

Frank shook his head. “I don’t think so. My senses don’t usually work that way.”

“Give it a try, okay.”

“It couldn’t hurt,” Carla added.

“Alright,” Frank said reluctantly. He took the key from Jake. He closed his hand around the key and closed his eyes. After a minute he opened them. “Nothing. Sorry.”

“I’ll do some digging,” Jake said. “Once I find out who owns the house we’ll go from there. Okay?”

“Sure,” Frank answered.

Carla turned to Frank. “I think we could stay around town for another day, don’t you? We passed by a real cozy-looking bed and breakfast on the outskirts of town. It could be fun.”

“Fun?”

“Yes, I’ve always wanted to check out a bed and breakfast place.”

“Eh, well, I guess we could stay one night.”

“Good,” Jake said. “Hopefully I’ll get back with you tomorrow with some good news.”

“By the way, sheriff,” Frank started, “you might want to set a watch on these kids again tonight. Though the train has always struck on a Friday it doesn’t mean that it will stick with that schedule.”

“I’ll let my deputy know what’s going on and have him round up some volunteers to keep watch.”

Frank and Carla checked into the bed and breakfast. Only half of the ten available rooms were filled so they were able to rent side by side rooms. Carla was fine with renting one room with two beds, but Frank said he was afraid of how it would look. Carla thought it was for another reason.

The inn sat on three acres of land occupied by a flower garden, a sizeable handmade gazebo that looked as if it belonged in an earlier century, and a small apple orchard. At the back of the inn was an inground swimming pool that only reached a depth of five feet.

“We should check out the apple orchard,” Carla said. She had come to Frank’s room.

“Why? I don’t even like apples.”

“Oh, come on, grumpy. A little fresh air will do you good.”

"I had my fresh air this morning."

"Are you going to stay in this room all day?"

"Why not? They have television."

"Come on. You know I'm going to bug you until you say yes."

"Can't you wait until my food settles?"

"We ate lunch over an hour ago."

"Okay, okay," he said grinning. "Let's get this over with."

The next day just after Frank and Carla finished a delicious breakfast of pancakes, eggs, grits, sausage, ham, and freshly made coffee Frank received a call. He excused himself and walked to a far wall to answer.

"Hello."

"Frank," Jake started. "I've found the owner of the house where Weldon used to live. Can you two meet me at the sheriff station?"

"Sure, we'll be there in a few."

Sheriff Jake, his big cowboy hat pushed down close to his eyes, stepped out of the sheriff's office a moment after Carla had parked her car. Frank and Carla walked over to him.

"We'll take my car," Jake said walking quickly. "The owner says what keys we got won't work. He changed the locks after Weldon died."

"Makes sense," Frank said.

"You're in quite a hurry this morning," Carla said as they got to his car.

"I'm anxious to get this puzzle solved. I stayed up half the night worrying that I might get a call saying some more kids have come up missing."

"I assume there weren't any," Carla said.

"No, but I don't want to go through this night after night. Parents can't watch their kids all the time. Besides, I have other things on my plate."

Jake slid behind the wheel and set his hat on the back seat. Carla slid into the back while Frank took the front.

Twenty minutes later they pulled up to an old ranch style house. Two broken down cars sat to one side of the driveway along with a short stack of lumber and some roofing tile. A newer looking sedan sat in the driveway next to the garage.

Jake rang the doorbell and moments later an elderly man leaning on a cane answered the door.

"Mr. Bigsley?" Jake asked.

"Yes sir, sheriff, ya'll come on in."

"Excuse the mess," he said as he led them into the living room. "I haven't gotten around to cleaning up yet. Give me a minute to get those keys."

In the living room, two armchairs and a sofa sat facing an old TV. The TV sat on a small plastic table next to a wall. The table was nearly hidden by sections of old newspapers. The two armchairs and most of the sofa were covered by a chaotic mixture of clothes and small boxes. Only a small opening had been left on the couch where Mr. Bigsley had been sitting.

They paused in the living room, watching through a wide archway as Bigsley ambled into his dining room. He removed something from off of a table cluttered with dishes.

Some appeared clean but others were stained with food from days earlier. From what they could see there were more stuff stacked haphazardly against the outside wall.

Biggsley walked back into the living room carrying a ring with several keys on it. "I can't remember which key fits which door." He handed the keys to Jake.

"I really appreciate this," Jake said.

Biggsley looked at Frank. "So, you're the psychic, huh?"

"I'm not exactly a psychic. I just ...eh, see things that others can't."

"Like ghosts?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes it's things. Things that are outside of our realm."

"That sounds kind of spooky."

Frank shrugged.

"Well, let me know if you find any ghost lurking in my old house." He grinned.

"Sure thing," Frank answered.

It took only fifteen minutes to drive the distance to the house Weldon rented at the time of his death. For a couple of minutes, Jake stood beside his car looking at the battered two-story house and the tall weeds that had overtaken the yard.

"Add a couple of bare trees with the spiny limbs," Carla began, "and some spider webs across the front porch and you'd have a great haunted house."

"One haunted train is enough for me," Jake remarked. "Let's just find the safe if it's in here and then figure out what's our next move."

"I'm all for that," Frank agreed.

"I've got a couple of flashlights" Jake announced as he went to his trunk. "The house doesn't have electricity and we're bound to have a few dark areas to investigate." He opened the trunk and handed them a flashlight.

Four concrete steps led up to a small porch with wooden rails about it. Jake opened the front door with the set of keys given to him by the landlord. They stepped into a short foyer. To one side was a covey with a long rod that held several clothes hangers. In the near dark, they looked like skeletal fingers reaching out for them. From there they passed into the living room. The room was bare except for an old, beaten armchair that leaned against the wall.

"No pictures on the wall," Frank said, "so I guess that means no wall safe."

"It would seem," Jake answered. "I think we need to split up. It'll be a lot quicker. If you two want to check out this floor, I'll take the upstairs." They both agreed.

Jake headed up the stairs while Carla and Frank looked about the empty room. Carla then moved over to one wall and began running her hand along the wall.

"What are you doing?" Frank asked.

"I thought that maybe the safe had been covered up."

"If it has been covered up, I doubt you'd be able to feel it."

She shrugged. "Yeah. I guess you're right. We'd have to get some x-rays to know for sure."

"We'll call that plan B," Frank remarked.

Carla started down the short hallway leading to a closet and a bathroom. The only bedrooms were upstairs.

The closet, which contained a long rod to hang clothes and a shelf above it, was empty. The bathroom itself, comprised of a medicine cabinet and a long cabinet for towels and such, was also bare.

Carla entered the dining room right behind Frank. There was nothing there, only blank walls.

"You know," Carla started, "other people have lived here since Weldon. Any one of them could have found the safe and taken it. Assuming the safe was ever here."

"I know but if it's not here I'm at a loss as to what else to do."

The kitchen was next. In this room, an old refrigerator and stove on opposite walls were ensconced between cabinets. Frank wiggled each of the units forward enough to be sure nothing was hidden behind them while Carla inspected the cabinets.

"All clear," Carla announced.

"Yeah, no luck here either."

"The upstairs is clear," Jake said, entering the kitchen. "Any luck here?"

"No," Carla answered.

"Where does that leave us?" Jake asked.

"I don't know," Frank answered.

"Maybe your first hypothesis was right," Jake started. "Maybe that ring was intended for his son. End of story."

Frank shrugged. "I don't know."

"Are you sure that key is for a safe?" Carla asked.

"I had it confirmed by a retailer who deals in safes."

"There are two things that are troubling me," Frank said. "One is this vision of seeing the keys. It doesn't make sense that I would be drawn to these keys if they weren't important. Two is the fact that Teresa witnessed this ghost train."

"She might have the same gift that you have," Carla said.

"True. But if she doesn't it would mean that this ... train, spirit, whatever you want to call it wanted her to see it. Or, perhaps wanted me to see her see it."

Jake cocked his head slightly. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not sure."

"Maybe it means she's involved somehow," Carla said.

Jake shrugged and for a few moments no one spoke.

"Perhaps we're looking at the wrong keys," Jake said.

"What other keys are there?" Frank asked.

Jake dangled the keys in front of them. "What about these keys?"

"The house keys?" Carla asked.

"Yes."

"Maybe they weren't for this house," Frank stated.

"Whose house are they for?" Carla asked.

Frank shrugged. "One of them could be to Teresa's. That's how she could be connected."

"But she didn't act like she knew him," Carla said.

"They could have been having an affair," Jake suggested. "That could be why she didn't say anything. But how would that tie in with this ghost train?"

Neither had an answer.

"We don't know for sure that one of these fit her door," Carla said.

"We could ask her," Frank suggested.

"No," Jake said. "She might lie about it. She might not want it revealed that she was having an affair, possibly with a married man. Possibly while his wife was dying."

“Yeah,” Carla agreed. “News of that would not only hurt her but Weldon’s son as well.”

“Okay,” Frank said. “What should we do?”

“Before we go off thinking that one of these keys could go to Teresa’s house we need to make sure that these keys are not the keys to the old locks,” Jake answered.

“And how do we do that?” Carla asked.

“I guess you two noticed that the landlord was somewhat of a hoarder.”

“Yeah, so?” Carla said.

“I’d be willing to bet the guy has got the old locks at his house. Apparently, there was nothing wrong with the locks, he only changed them for security reasons. I don’t think the man could force himself to throw them away.”

Frank said, “and if one of the keys doesn’t fit the old locks the chance that it goes to Teresa’s house greatly increases.”

“Right. Load up. Let’s go talk to the old man.”

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Bigsley asked when he opened the door to them.

“No,” Jake answered. “We have another favor to ask.”

“Alright, what is it?”

“Is there any chance you could have the old locks for that house?”

The old man paused as if thinking about it. “I probably do. Come on in and I’ll check.”

The man disappeared into a spare bedroom. They could hear him rummaging through boxes and stacks of saved items. He came out a few minutes later with the front and back doorknobs. “Here you go.”

Jake removed the set of keys left by Weldon.

“Where’d you get those keys?” Bigsley asked.

“These are the keys Weldon had on him at the time of the train wreck.”

“Oh.”

Jake tried the house keys. One of the keys fit one doorknob and one fit the other. The last key didn’t fit either lock. “Have you got any idea what this other key could be for?”

“No. There should only be two keys.”

“What about a deadbolt?”

“That house only had a sliding bolt back then. There’s no key for that.”

“Okay,” Jake said. He handed the man back the keys to his house. “Thanks for your help.”

“What about those other keys don’t I get them back?”

“No. Not yet. They’re part of an investigation.”

“How about after you’re finished?”

“After we’re finished you can have them back.”

“Looks like we’ve reached an impasse for now,” Jake said as they headed back to the station. “I’m not sure where to go from here.”

“What about seeing if this odd key fits Teresa’s door?” Carla said.

“Yes, but how do I go about doing that? There’s no evidence that she did anything wrong. And if I ask her if that key belongs to her and she is guilty of something she’s going to answer no and then probably change the locks.”

"In the meantime, I don't believe this ghost train will stop," Frank said
"You don't know that, Jake said. "You might have been right all along. The spirit of Weldon that's apparently connected to this train somehow may simply have wanted the ring to go to his son."

"He's right," Carla said. "It all sounds so reasonable to me."

No one spoke again until they reached the station.

"Come on into the station and let's talk about this."

Once in his office, Jake went to his refrigerator parked against a far wall. "Anyone for a cold drink?"

"Yes," they both said.

Jake sat behind his desk. "We could wait a few more days and see if this train shows up again."

"I can't hang around that long," Frank said. "I'm sorry."

"I understand."

"There's got to be something we can do," Frank said.

"There is," Carla answered. "We wait till Teresa is away from her house and I go try out the key."

"I can't be involved in that," Jake answered. "That would be breaking and entering."

"No, it wouldn't. I would be using a key and I wouldn't even have to open the door; I would only need to turn the knob."

"I don't know but 'intent' might be all that's needed to bring charges."

"It would take me less than a minute," Carla explained, "I don't even think the alarm would be affected."

Jake sighed. "If anyone should do this it should be me. This is my problem."

"No," Carla said. "Since I wouldn't be entering the premises probably the most that would happen to me is that I'd get a fine. But for you it would mean the end of your career."

"The job doesn't pay that well, anyway."

"I should do this," Carla protested.

"I can do this just as well," Frank said.

"No. It needs to be me," Carla insisted. "I can babble on the spur of the moment should someone come to the door and question me. After a few minutes they'll be happy to just get rid of me."

"You can do that," Frank agreed.

"Alright," Jake said. "It will have to be tomorrow. I'll need to find a time when no one is going to be at home. Can you two stay another day?"

Carla looked at Frank. "I guess we can stay another day," Frank answered.

"The town will pay for your hotel bill," Jake said.

They went back to the same bed and breakfast.

"We're spending way too much time here," Frank said. "I should be charging them ten times or more what they're paying me."

"Believe me, Frank, this adventure is going to pay for itself many times over once we get the story out."

"What story? We don't even know if this is going anywhere."

"If the key fits the lady's door it will be a start."

“Then what? Even if we rightfully assume that Weldon and Terisa were having an affair, where does that leave us? It might be immoral depending on whether either one of them were married at the time, but it’s not a crime.”

“I don’t know where it takes us,” Carla began, “but what choice does that leave us? According to you if this train isn’t stopped, sooner or later it will pick up more children.”

“Maybe the sheriff needs to call a ghost hunter crew to handle this. Or, perhaps a few psychics.”

“And let them get the spotlight? No. They couldn’t do any better than you. We just have to take this one step at a time.”

“Remember, I have another book signing in a few days.”

“I know.”

“Just one step at a time, huh?”

She nodded.

Sheriff Jake called them shortly before noon the following day. Frank answered it on the first ring. “Hello.”

“This is Jake. Everything is set. Teresa is at work and her daughter just went to the mall. Teresa won’t be back from the hospital till late, but her daughter could decide to come home at any moment.”

“Okay, will do.”

Teresa’s house was nestled in a nice, middle-class neighborhood. One lady, outside tending her flowers, waved to them as they passed by.

Carla parked her car in front of Teresa’s house while Frank waited in the car. Frank didn’t expect a problem but wanted to be there just in case.

Carla carried the key in her hand. She wanted this to be as quick as possible. She was more nervous than she thought she would be. When she reached the door, she looked quickly. There was nobody watching. *That wasn’t suspicious at all* she thought. She pushed the key into the lock. It went in easily. She turned the key and it unlocked the door. She slid the key out of the slot.

“Hey,” a woman’s voice called out to her from her right.

Carla closed her hand around the key and looked over at the woman. She was on the porch next door. She had just come out of her house. “I was looking for Teresa. I thought she was supposed to be off work today.”

“No. I saw her leave earlier today and she was wearing her smocks.”

“Okay. I guess I was mistaken. I’ll just give her a call. Thanks.” She slipped out her phone as if to make a call.

“You welcome.”

She headed back to the car.

“Well?” Frank asked as she slipped back into the driver’s seat.

“It fits.”

“Let’s go see Jake, see what he wants to do.”

“I’m sorry to drag you two into this,” Jake said from behind his desk. “I guess I expected you to find the spirit of the train and send it into the light. Or, something like that. I thought it would be like a one-day thing. Two days at the most.”

“What’s your plan now?” Frank asked.

"I do a background check on the lady to see if anything turns up. I'll have to do it discreetly. I have no legal cause to do this."

"How long is this going to take?" Carla asked.

"I don't know. If this was a legitimate investigation, I could probably get what I needed today or tomorrow. But I have to rely on contacts that may not want to get involved."

"I've got a book signing coming up in a couple days," Frank said.

"I understand. I won't ask you to stay any longer."

"We can come back," Carla offered.

Frank sighed. "Yeah, assuming you find something I can work with. But, if you don't, I'll go back to my original theory and hope this train doesn't return."

"That's all we can do. Thanks for coming." He stood up. "I'll be in touch." He shook hands with them.

CHAPTER 3

After Frank and Carla left Sheriff Jake Blisten began making calls to find someone to conduct a background search for him. Though most records were public it usually required the consent of the person whose background was being checked unless there was a case pending. Which, of course, there wasn't. If he were to be caught checking her background it could jeopardize anything incriminating, he might find. He finally found a retired cop who still had good connections at the police station where he used to work. Jake simply told the man that he had suspicions about a woman and wanted to confirm a few things before proceeding to a formal investigation. The man agreed ranting about how the criminals now days had too many rights and told him he should have the information he needed by tomorrow evening.

Deputy Chester Hope, a lanky man in his mid-twenties with the face of a teenager, walked into the office and sat down across from Jake. "Haven't seen much of you lately, Sheriff."

"No. Been busy with this haunted train thing."

"You know this train could be a big tourist boom for the town if we spread the word."

"Two problems with that. One, we would be overrun with strangers. Once they heard the train whistle, they'd be all over the place taking pictures of the kids, hanging all over the tracks. It would make my job of keeping these kids safe a lot more difficult. Two, unless they had some psychic abilities, they wouldn't be able to see the damn thing anyway so it wouldn't be long before they became bored with the town and start accusing us of staging the entire thing."

"Yeah, I hadn't thought about that."

"By the way, chances are that if the train does come by it will be on a Friday, but just to be sure we need to keep people informed about the possibility that their kids may wander off. And, once it gets dark keep an ear out for any train whistle."

"Sure thing, sheriff."

That evening went by peacefully. There was no train whistle and there were no young kids unaccounted for.

The next evening Jake received information in his email about the background check of Teresa Lang. He read it slowly then decided to send an email to Frank to see what he thought of it.

Frank and Carla were sitting at a restaurant eating supper when Frank received the email. He read it to himself then turned to Carla. "Got an email from the Sheriff. Let me read it to you."

"Sure," she said, setting down her glass of wine.

"There were some interesting things in the report though nothing incriminating. Years earlier, sometime before Weldon's accident that killed him Teresa's husband was murdered in an apparent home invasion. According to the record Teresa ran into the kitchen only moments after her husband had been shot. The perk took a single shot at Teresa, missed her, and ran out the kitchen door he had entered through. The man was wearing a mask and Teresa had only given a vague description. The killer was never caught, and the investigation had eventually gone cold."

"Curious," Carla said. "I assume Teresa was cleared of any involvement?"

“There’s nothing else in the email about that. But since she was never charged with anything, I would say that was a good assumption. There is one more thing. Jake says that a month after the murder Teresa was picked up for drunk driving.”

Carla took a bite of her steak before speaking again. “Her husband just died. I can understand that. In her distress and inebriation, she made a bad decision when she chose to drive.”

“Yes. I don’t see much in that.”

“I don’t see anything in that report that helps us.”

“No. It doesn’t seem to.”

Both were silent a few moments not knowing what to say.

Frank pushed his plate away. He had eaten most of his supper. He had never been a big eater. He took a couple sips of his wine and tried to think of what else to do.

“If these train visits continue the town will eventually have to call in someone else.”

“Yep.”

“You should still be lauded a hero. You saved those three boys.”

“I know, but what if other kids manage to get aboard the train? Would I, or some other ghostbuster type, be able to rescue them?”

“You would know better than I.”

Frank finished his wine then waved to the waiter for more. The waiter stopped at their table and filled up both their glasses.

“Maybe we should go back,” Frank said after the waiter had left. “After the signing tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“Maybe I can pick up a vibe or something. Something to get us back on track.”

“I guess it’s worth a shot.” She smiled. “You know a couple of days ago I was about to release a little teaser in the local paper about your new book. The one you were going to write about the ghost train. I’m glad I didn’t.”

“Yeah, me too. That could have been quite embarrassing.”

“You going to call Jake?”

“After we get back to the hotel room.”

That evening Frank called Jake to let him know that they were planning to come up. He still didn’t know what he was going to do. He hoped that this gift of his would show him something else but didn’t feel comfortable that it would.

Jake explained that he was still trying to get more background information on Teresa and the homicide of her husband. He felt that there had to be a connection between the murder, Weldon, and the ghost train. Frank agreed and tried to sound optimistic that he would find something the next day.

Sleep that night didn’t come easy for Frank. He worried about the children. It may have been simple pride, but he didn’t think anyone could have done any more than he did. Almost all the people he had met claiming to have supernatural powers were frauds. There were a few exceptions. Even the exceptions, however, had meager powers, revealing simple truths sometimes mixed with untruths.

He thought about the things he had seen on the train, running them through his mind as if trying to decipher a code. There had to be something he was missing. He thought that he might have to take another trip aboard the train to get more information. That would be a scary option. He didn’t know if the train would even allow him aboard

again, and without children, he couldn't be sure of where the train would take him, or even if it would allow him to leave once he boarded.

The last time he looked at the clock it was nearly two in the morning. The book signing wasn't till one in the afternoon so he could sleep late if he needed to. He didn't want to, though, he was used to a routine. He would get up at six, light exercise for a half-hour, shower, and eat breakfast while watching the news on TV. At book signings and other events, he would eat breakfast with Carla, and sometimes others, at the restaurant or hotel.

He finally dozed off but started tossing and turning in his sleep, mumbling words. He dreamed of riding the train again. It all seemed the same. As he experienced the wreck, he could feel himself being jerked violently about in the seat. Then he could see Weldon slumped in his seat, the keys on the floor. He stared at the keys. One by one they began to disappear falling away as if made of dust. After a few moments, only one key remained.

He was awakened by someone banging on the door. He checked his cell phone. It was seven-thirty. He quickly put on his clothes and went to the door. It was Carla.

"I was going to ask if you were ready for breakfast." She was looking at his hair. It was sticking straight up in the middle. "I can see you got a new hairstyle."

He pushed his hair down with a swipe of his hand. "Sorry, I overslept."

"You don't ever oversleep."

"I had trouble sleeping. Just give me a few minutes while I jump in the shower."

"Sure. I'll just watch a little television in the meantime."

He grabbed the clothes he had set out the night before and headed for the bathroom.

His mind was a blur for the start of the morning. He ate breakfast slowly and was on his second cup of coffee when he suddenly gasped.

"What's wrong?" Carla asked.

"I just remembered my dream."

"Your dream?"

"Yes. Last night. I dreamed I was back on the train. It was just like the ride I had but with one exception. This time when I looked at Weldon's keys they began to disappear."

"His keys disappeared?"

"Not all of them. One remained. The key to the safe."

Carla shook her head. "What does that mean? We looked for a safe but couldn't find one."

"I know, but apparently we didn't look hard enough."

"So, what do you want to do?"

He paused as though he didn't want to answer. "I guess we need to go back up there and look for it." He leaned back in his chair. "In the meantime, I'll call Jake and ask him to start checking around again."

"Okay. You sure that dream is directing you to the safe?"

"I'm never *really* sure of any of this. But I don't know what else it could mean."

Late afternoon the next day they met up with Sheriff Jake at the sheriff station.

"I'm at a loss of where to start looking for this missing safe," Jake admitted. "I thought we did a pretty thorough search of the rental house. Any suggestions?"

"As I said before," Carla began, "one of the tenants might have taken the safe."

"If that's true, which tenant?" Jake asked. "There must have been a lot of tenants living in this house through all those years. And, with a month to month tenancy, I doubt the old man kept any records."

"Wait a minute," Frank said. "I can see two things that could have happened."

"What's that?" Carla asked.

"After Weldon's death, the landlord would have come to inspect the house. If he had found the safe, he would have either, one: turned the safe over to authorities, or, two: taken the safe himself."

"Interesting," Jake remarked. "We could question Weldon's boy to see if he's got the safe or if he knows what happened to it."

"I don't know," Carla said. "I think the old man took it. Weldon wasn't married at the time. He had no kinfolk nearby other than his young son who probably didn't even know his dad had a safe. If he did know it wouldn't have meant much to him. I doubt he would have mentioned it to anyone."

"If the landlord, or anyone else for that matter, had taken the safe, I doubt there would be anything left inside it."

Frank shook his head. "This key means something. I'm as sure of it as I can be. That means the safe is important, but I can't say why."

Jake nodded. "Okay, let's go talk to the landlord."

Mr. Bigsley opened his front door to allow the three of them in.

"Back again, huh. What can I do for ya."

"We're looking for a safe Mr. Bigsley," Jake said. "We think you might have it."

"Me? Look around. Does it look like I have anything of value to put in a safe?"

"You're not in trouble. If you took a safe from your rental house after Weldon died that's your business. We just want to know what was inside that safe."

Bigsley looked angry and confused. "I don't remember no safe. But if I took it it was probably because the man still owed me rent money. I don't remember if he did, but he might have. A lot of the tenants sneak out without paying."

"Mr. Weldon didn't sneak out," Carla said. "He died in a train accident."

"Could you please check?" Frank asked. "Maybe you took it intending to give it to his relative."

"Yeah, I might of done that." He looked at the three of them. "Okay, I'll check. Wait here." He strolled down a short corridor to a bedroom and a spare room.

"What do you think?" Frank asked Jake after Bigsley went looking for the safe.

"I think there's a good chance he took the safe, but I don't think he remembers."

Bigsley returned a few minutes later. "I found a safe. It was a little hidden. I don't know if it's the one you're looking for. You'll have to come look at it. It's pretty heavy. I can't pick it up."

"Sure," Jake answered.

Bigsley turned and started toward the spare room. The others followed him.

The safe was not like Jake had thought. It was not a wall safe. It was more for the secure keeping of important papers in the event of a fire. It was approximately eight

inches deep by eighteen inches long and twelve inches wide. It had a sturdy handle. Boxes and other miscellaneous items were all around it.

Jake slid the safe out from all the other junk that the man had saved up over all the years. He noticed that the line where the top and bottom came together was nicked, scratched and cut as though someone had used a screwdriver and other crude tools to try to pry it open.

“Did you do that?” Jake asked.

“Eh, yes. I didn’t have a key, so I tried to pry it open. I first tried to pick the lock but didn’t have any success. After that I sat the thing here and forgot about it.”

“Okay. Let’s see if this key works. He stuck the key in the slot. At first the key wouldn’t turn but after a couple of jiggles, he was able to twist it a quarter turn. The lid popped open slightly. He pulled the lid all the way open.

“A gun,” Carla announced, completely surprised.

“I thought there’d be some money in it,” Bigsley said.

“This is unexpected,” Frank said. “I’m not sure what that means.” For a moment he paused in thought. “There’s some paperwork underneath the gun. Maybe that will tell us something.”

“Maybe,” Jake answered. He looked to Bigsley. “I need a plastic bag. A large freezer bag would do if you got one. Two would be better.”

“I believe I can get you a couple.” He headed off to the kitchen.

“Do you think that gun might be evidence of something?” Carla asked.

“I don’t know but better to be safe.”

Bigsley handed Jake two freezer bags.

Slipping his hand in one of the bags he lifted the gun out of the safe. “It’s a .38 Smith & Wesson revolver. No bullets.” He slipped the gun into the other bag. He zipped the bag closed. With his hand still in the one bag, he began looking at the papers. There were birth certificates and social security cards for Weldon and his son, a driver’s license of his late wife and several rings including an engagement and a wedding ring.”

Carla said, “I would bet that those rings belonged to Weldon’s ex-wife. I don’t think that ring that you found was hers.”

“Probably not,” Jake answered. “Unless either one of you have another suggestion, I say we send the gun to the lab and see what they come up with. Until then I see nothing else, we can do.”

They both agreed.

“I’ll let you two know something as soon as I know something. Hopefully you two won’t have to come back here. Though, I’ll miss your company.” He tipped his hat to them.

It was almost two weeks later when Frank got a call from Sheriff Jake.

“How’s the book business?” Jake asked.

“Good. People keep asking me about my next book and I keep putting them off. Until this case is solved.”

“Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. A lot has gone on since you two left. The good news is that the train hasn’t come back.”

“Great! And ...?”

“I’ve got the results from the gun. The gun was wiped mostly clean.”

“Oh, no.”

"I said mostly. They found a partial print that belonged to Teresa. Her prints were on file because of her past DUI."

"Okay, what does that mean?"

"Ballistic tests were done. The bullet that killed Teresa's husband came from that gun."

"So, Teresa killed her husband and tried to make it look like a home invasion?"

"Yes, but she claimed it was in self-defense. She said that her husband had found out that she was having an affair with Weldon. He had been drinking. He took out his gun and was going to kill her. She grabbed his arm and they started fighting for the gun. The gun went off one time hitting the wall. She was able to wrench the gun from her husband's hand when he stumbled and fell backward. According to her when he got to his feet he came after her. It was then that she shot him. He fell forward and died instantly. Immediately after that she called Weldon to help her cover it up."

"It didn't take her long to confess."

"I think it had been bothering her for years and she was glad to get it off her chest."

"What about the ring?"

"The ring was to be her engagement ring. Weldon had asked her to marry him but she had turned him down."

"Oh, wow." He sighed. "I'm glad this finally worked out. I'll let Carla know. She's waiting in the lobby. This is the last day of my book signing."

"Okay. Thanks for everything. Give Carla my best."

"I will."

"Carla ran up to him as he got off the elevator. "Great news," he said. "The case of the ghost train is over."

"Good. Tell me about it later." She grinned as though holding a secret. "You won't believe what this guy just told me!"

"Oh, no."

THE END